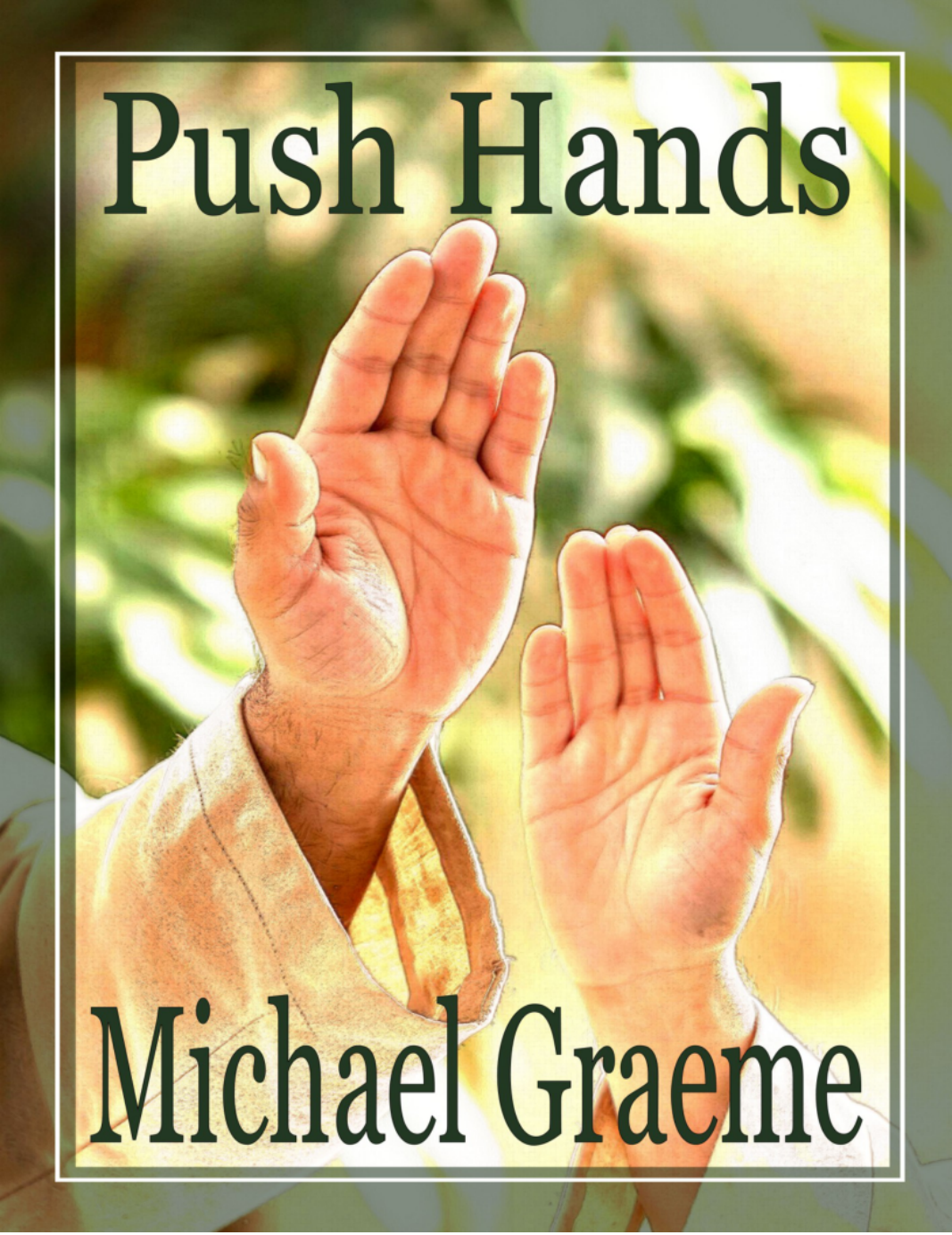
Push Hands



Michael Graeme

Push Hands
by
Michael Graeme

Internet Archive Edition

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Dedication

Written in appreciation of all the Carolines,
for what they have taught me about life,
about love,
and about myself.

* * * * *

Push Hands

In the Chinese Martial Art of Tai Chi, "Push Hands" is a form of sparring taught to beginners in order that they might develop a sense of awareness of both their own centre and the centre of their partner.
For more advanced students it becomes a form of self defence, while for masters, and certain sensitive individuals, it can be appreciated as a highly expressive art-form.

* * * * *

CHAPTER 1

Philip Markham stood on the factory receiving bay, waiting for a truck to arrive. It was going up for five and it didn't look like it was coming. He sheltered under the awning as a fine drizzle drifted down. The world was soaked and grey and cold. He was in his shirt-sleeves, his back and underarms damp, but not from the rain. He was hot: sweaty-hot, and it felt good to be out in the cool, out of the office and away from the computer and its never-ending pile of e-mails.

He sweated easily these days, felt tired and old, though he'd only just turned 45. He was worried there might be something wrong with him, some mysterious ailment gnawing at his insides, but then he'd felt like this for the better part of a decade now and he was still alive, still bumbling on in the same old way, so there couldn't be that much wrong with him, could there?

The factory was crumbly and filthy, a left over from the war years, a higgledy piggledy pile of decaying red brick and flaking paint. The other buildings that had grown up round about seemed brighter by comparison, but were somehow faceless and dead. They were newer, obviously, and Phil wondered what they did, what they made, if anything – for he was just waking up to the fact no one in England actually made anything any more. Perhaps the buildings just stored things, or they were call-centres for insurance companies or travel agents.

Beyond these other buildings, rising all around in the murky distance, the town of Middleton sprawled messily, an ugly assortment of merged suburbs, dirty brick and concrete, barbed wire, security cameras and about a hundred thousand assorted lives. He was feeling very small today, feeling the self important weight of all those lives pressing down upon him, squeezing him, squeezing him under or out... somewhere.

Between the long abandoned chimneys of the old Atlas mill, he caught a glimpse of the moors, flat capped under a ton of greasy, iron grey cloud. A bad day for walking, he thought. Indeed it was a bad day for just about anything.

He checked his watch, anxious now – not that the truck wasn't going to come, but more that it would, and he'd have to stay after-hours to deal with it. He had an appointment that evening and didn't want to have to cancel it because it had taken him months to pluck up the courage to go in the first place.

He listened inside his head to see if the irritating sound was still there. He could hear an air conditioning unit whirring away on one of the modern buildings next door, and there was a gentle wind blowing,

raising a sigh from the rooftops, and somewhere above all that was the rasping whistle of his tinnitus. There was no escaping it, and apparently no cure either, or so the weary old doctor had told him at the surgery – that he'd just have to get used to it.

The doctor had also handed him a questionnaire to fill out, apparently in order to see if he was depressed – like one of those stupid magazine pseudo-psychology quiz things. It was all rubbish of course: he wasn't depressed, but the questionnaire disagreed, and quick as a flash the doctor was writing him out a prescription for antidepressants.

"But I'm not depressed."

"Well, apparently, you are, Mr Markham."

"But doesn't everyone feel like something's missing from their lives?"

"Possibly, I can't say, but there's no need for it. Just take these pills and you'll feel like a new person. I've been on them for years."

"But it's my ear I'm struggling with, Doctor."

"Well, the tablets will make you feel less depressed about it."

"What?"

Phil had checked the pills out on the Internet. Sure enough, it sounded like they'd calm his middle-aged angst, fill the hole in his soul with a kind of fluffy padding, but they might also make him impotent, something the doctor had obviously forgotten to mention. That was neither here nor there, of course, since Sally no longer required much from him in that department any more, but the pills might also stop him from sleeping – another little thing the doctor had forgotten to mention. He supposed that could have been sorted out by more pills, but of greater concern to him was the drinking. He couldn't take the pills and drink, you see? And if he didn't get his half bottle of wine with whisky chaser to finish off the day, well, he reckoned he'd really have something to be depressed about.

The breeze changed direction and blew the drizzle into his face. He didn't move, but savoured the exquisite coolness of it.

"I am not depressed," he said, then looked around, embarrassed in case anyone had overheard. But the shopfloor had gone home ages ago and there was only Caroline in the office, her door closed, head bent over her computer. She couldn't hear him, and like all the Carolines before her, she probably couldn't see him either – not even if he'd been standing right in front of her.

Caroline's real name was Sandra and she made his heart ache deliciously. Indeed she was one of the few things in his life right now that reminded him he was actually alive. Thirtyish, blonde, and shapely, she was too young for him of course, even if he'd been stupid enough to begin an affair, which he hoped he wasn't, and always

supposing she'd be interested, which he doubted. Indeed, he doubted she even knew his name, even though they'd worked under the same roof for years. That was the trouble with Carolines, he thought: they planted in your head the insane notion they were in love with you, but when it came down to it, they couldn't even remember your name.

Five o'clock.

Phil sighed. No truck. He'd have to get on to the suppliers in the morning to see where his parts had gone. But for now he was committed to his course, and turned away from the receiving bay like a man facing execution. He walked slowly past the office window and waved.

"Night Sandra," he called.

Maybe he hadn't called loudly enough because she didn't hear him and remained bent over her computer. He saw images of sand and sea reflected in her big, round spectacles and guessed she was browsing the holiday web sites. Maybe that's what he needed – a holiday. But there were certain things you couldn't escape, like the tinnitus, things you just ended up taking with you, wherever you went.

CHAPTER 2

Doctor Lin operated out of an old terraced house in a run-down back-street of Middleton. There was a hairdresser's on one side and a dodgy looking car accessory shop on the other. The Tai Chi symbol in the window looked out of place, a whispered and worthless platitude amid the overwhelming decay of decades of neglect. Phil ran his eye over the list of ailments that might apparently be cured: Sports injuries he understood, but whatever were Man/Woman problems?

He was dismayed to discover that Dr Lin was, in fact, a woman – white coated and clean looking – a Chinese lady with medium length black hair, dark eyes and perfect white teeth. Her complexion was clear and youthful, but he couldn't guess her age; she might have been thirty, or fifty. He caught his breath and hoped Caroline wasn't playing tricks on him here: he desperately needed Dr Lin not to be another Caroline.

He took a deep breath and explained about the tinnitus. She listened patiently, nodding now and then, although he suspected she was only getting every other word. Doctor Lin understood "tinnitus", but looking at the overheated and sweaty man before her, she knew a ringing ear was the least of his problems. He seemed keen to blow it all out, to talk and talk, his mind a rat's nest of confused thoughts and though a lot of it was indeed unintelligible to her limited English, she knew it was good for him to talk, so she listened with her head tilted sympathetically to one side.

When he'd finished, she asked him simple questions about his family history – who had died of what? Diabetes? Heart problems? Arthritis? Grim stuff really and Phil was struggling to catch some of her words because her accent was difficult to follow. She asked him to stick out his tongue and then checked the pulse on both wrists, noticing the way he flinched as she moved in to touch him.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm a little jumpy."

"Bowels all right?"

"Em... yes."

"Sexual relation?"

"Em... normal," he replied, noting as he did so the slight inflection that inadvertently implied vagueness. Normal for what? A middle aged man who'd been married to the same woman for twenty years? Perhaps no sexual relations at all was normal at that stage of life. "Yes, quite normal... I suppose." Is that what Man/Woman problems were, he wondered? Well, so far as he knew the only cure for that was to have sex with someone else once in a while – but that was just too complicated and dangerous, and any other less radical cure struck him

as being hopelessly optimistic.

"Appetite all right?"

"Yes."

The sweat was beginning to drip down from his hairline now. He was conscious of it, and embarrassed.

"Warm outside?" enquired Dr. Lin.

"No... it's turned quite cool really. So, em... what do you think? Can you help?"

She thought for a while. The man was outwardly calm, but that was his Englishness, his stiff upper lip, she supposed, while inside he was positively incandescent. There was a year's work here, but she surmised he wouldn't have the patience for it. Everyone wanted a quick fix. Some aspirins, antibiotics, antidepressants, then on with job.

"Help? Yes. You have too much heat, Mr Markham. Must cool you down. Qi also is very weak."

"Qi?"

"Energy, Mr Markham. Feel tired all the time?"

"Well... yes."

"Break out sweating for no reason?"

"Often, yes."

"Feel dizzy sometimes? In a crowd maybe?"

"Yes... yes..."

"Ear ringing because kidney energy low."

"My kidneys? Is that serious?"

"Serious if you don't cool down. Nourish Qi."

Dr Lin smiled. "We take some herbs to begin. But ringing ear is stubborn problem. It will take time. First thing is balance, Mr Markham. Then ear will stop ringing... maybe."

"Only maybe?"

"Late nights, Mr Markham?"

"Em..." yes, he was thinking – every night, late, holding back tomorrow. Wine, whiskey, hangover, then up in the small hours relieving the pressure in his bladder. He hoped she wouldn't ask him about the drinking. "Some late nights, yes. I really should do better, I know."

"Alcohol?"

Damn! "A little,..."

She smiled again. "Hmm. Take these herbs. Come back, same time next week?"

"Okay."

"Twenty-five pounds please."

"Eh? Oh... of course."

Phil drove home through the rain, a dull ache between his eyes which he supposed was a symptom of the tensions of the day, and also

the lingering remains of last night's cheap wine.

"I will do better," he said, forcing himself past the off-licence. It didn't matter, he'd plenty of whisky at home – maybe two or three glasses tonight. At least he wouldn't appear like so much of an alcoholic to the man behind the counter – he could at least say to himself now that he wasn't in there every night. But the man in the off-licence doesn't care – I mean why should he? I'm paying his bloody wages.

That's how Phil felt about Dr Lin, too. He wasn't used to dipping into his wallet after a visit to the doctor. And all he'd got for his money was a couple of boxes of herbs with unintelligible names and a lot of guff about Qi and Kidney Energy.

CHAPTER 3

He was home a little later than usual and sensed the resentment of his absence in the fact that the door was locked, the key in the lock on the inside, so he couldn't get his own key in, and had to knock like a stranger, then wait with the rain dripping down his neck. Alas, he thought, this was normal. Sally came slowly, opened the door with an abrasive sigh and, without looking at him, turned back into the hall as if she'd been called away from something far more important. His tea was in the oven, a scalding hot plate containing a shrivelled mess of cabbage, potatoes and cottage pie. He hid his disappointment, knowing he should be grateful Sally bothered to make his tea at all.

She'd known he was going to be late. He'd arranged it all, told her he wouldn't be home for tea, *better not to make any Sal, I'll fix something up later*. But Sally didn't like him making a mess in the kitchen of an evening – even though he always cleaned it up afterwards – it was just a thing she had about the lingering of unwashed pots. He'd been through all this before, and though neither he nor Sally were particularly argumentative, she was easily irritated by such things as lingering pots, and it made him feel knotted up inside when she got upset. So he took his revoltingly overdone tea and ate it alone while Sally sat comatose in front of the T.V. and watched soaps.

The children were quick to register he was home and began hovering around while he ate, which he hated because it always gave him indigestion. He might have been grateful for their company, but their presence was most likely just a prelude to nagging for something. They seemed subdued tonight though and he sensed they'd already had a telling off.

Elspeth, at eight years, had begun her apprenticeship in the life-skills of emotional manipulation and was sniffling as if upset, while waving her grubby homework sheet. Phil would be expected to do it for her – the blasted question of the week, he supposed.

"What is the highest capital city in the world?" or "Who were the Aztecs?"

He'd learned a lot of useless information from Elspeth's homeworks, while it seemed all Elspeth had learned was how to get others to do stuff for her.

With Marty, at 12, it was usually mathematics. Phil would sort him out later. Marty had begun to nag less, and now hid himself away more, much to Phil's disappointment. He didn't want to have a distant relationship with his son, but it seemed Marty felt otherwise. It was easy to see why – Elspeth was just that much better at monopolising

his attention.

Sally called through to remind him, during the adverts, that he'd still not changed the light-bulb in the hall. It was true – it had needed changing for days now, but the lights were quite low down and Sally could easily reach them without standing on a stool or anything. It was only a matter of unscrewing one bulb and screwing in another. But they'd been through this as well: Sally did enough. She worked full time and it was sufficient she sorted out the washing and most of the cooking as well. Phil would have done these things, but he worked longer hours, so it was true that Sally had the brunt of it, being home first, sorting out the kids and everything, during the week. He promised to change the light-bulb, then felt a sudden stabbing pain in his guts, a burning indigestion settling in already.

As he washed up, he heard the T.V. blaring out the theme tune from the next soap in the evening's line-up. Sally was still comatose in front of it. There was yet another soap to come after that and, after that, some appalling reality T.V. show. For an intelligent woman, he thought, she didn't half watch some crap.

He smiled as he changed the light-bulb, remembering when he'd bought a copy of Tomb Buster to play on Marty's Game Station: he liked computer games, liked computers, liked the Internet, but Sally had caught him manipulating Tomb Buster's handsomely endowed heroine Sara Short through a fiendishly difficult tomb, and had feigned disgust at his apparent childishness.

"What you're doing's rubbish," she'd said, a corner of her lip curled in contempt. "Aren't you getting too old for stuff like that?"

Phil was surprised – he supposed it was a bit childish, but it was also entertaining, relaxing – okay it was a time waster but, by the same token, so was a game of chess, to say nothing of sitting in front of the television all night watching soaps that were about as representative of real life as an episode of the Teletubbies. He didn't see the difference and wished he'd said so at the time, except you don't do you? And Sally was his wife – you didn't pick fights with your wife, and you sort of trusted she didn't want to pick fights with you. Okay, there was a lot of needling, but she was just tired all the time. She needed him to understand where she was coming from, but sadly he didn't, and he supposed he was doing a bad job of pretending that he did.

He came into the lounge wearing another painted smile, and asked if she wanted a coffee. She nodded in response. He looked at her slumped there, bound up in the nonsense that was being enacted on the T.V.. It seemed to him the soaps always involved a lot of shouting and childish behaviour, a lot of nastiness, a lot of infidelity. Life wasn't like that – at least theirs wasn't. Perhaps Sally would have

preferred it if it was. She'd recently turned forty, and though she wasn't quite the slender stick of a thing he'd married, he still found her attractive and lived for her smile, lived for her touch – though that didn't happen very often these days. The smiles were few and if they touched at all it was him touching her, and that didn't feel anywhere near as good as her touching him.

What is the diameter of the earth, daddy?

Phil knew what he was supposed to do. He was supposed to encourage Elspeth to look it up. "Now, I wonder where we might be able to find out about that?" he asked her.

Elspeth sighed and gave him a disappointed look. "On the Internet," she said, not one to be caught out so easily. "Try Wikipedia."

"Well... yes... but... I really think... Have you looked in the encyclopaedia? Or perhaps an astronomy book? We have a good one in the cupboard."

However, the determining factor in all of this was usually more how tired he and Sally were. It was now after eight. The kids had been home since three thirty and done nothing except muck about, while Phil's feet had yet to touch the ground – and he guessed they probably wouldn't that evening.

The astronomy book had been a favourite of his as a child, quite basic, but the diameter of the earth was well within its scope. However, Elspeth's eyes had glazed over long before Phil turned to the right page. And the problem with books of course was that you had to physically copy out the information: write down: "The earth's diameter is..." Whereas with the Internet you could just cut and paste the required sentence into a blank document, then print it off.

"But what if the information is wrong, Elspeth?" he cautioned. "We must be careful of our sources on the Internet, and do some cross checking."

"But your book might be wrong, too."

"I suppose it might, but one takes it on trust that the information was checked before the book was published. On the Internet, anyone can publish anything, but it doesn't mean it's true."

Phil was getting very tired though and was tempted just to print the bloody thing off like she wanted him to. His guts were on fire and he suddenly remembered he'd not moved his bowels yet. The problem with that was Sally would be wanting a bath at eight thirty, the kids needing baths straight after, and they'd all pull a face if he sullied the air for them. He really wished there was another option but there wasn't, though it still made him feel mean and guilty, made him wonder if his bathroom odours were worse than anyone else's, and if he shouldn't perhaps be going to the doctor about that as well!

"Hi Marty, how's it going?"

Marty was by now glued to his Game Station, his attention gripped, mid race in the rancid, airless gloom of his bedroom. He responded with a grunt and Phil sensed at once he was intruding.

"Any homework, mate?"

Inwardly he grimaced at his approach – could one ever really be mates with one's children? He wanted to think so, but sometimes he wondered. Your mates went their own way, lived their own lives and you respected them for it. Your children were different, needed discipline now and then, needed keeping on the right track. Marty shrugged, his eyes not moving from the screen.

"Is that yes or no?"

Marty sighed impatiently and snapped the game onto pause. "Not tonight. Mrs Walsh is away. Innit? We had a crappy stand in."

"Language, Marty!"

"What?"

Crappy was no longer considered bad language, apparently. "And what's this "innit"? Whatever does that mean?"

Oh, shut up Phil, you sound just like your father!

Marty sighed again, "Sorry," he said, but there was a sneer in it, and Phil felt his guts twist once more. Should he stamp on that, or would that be too sensitive, too extreme? He let it go, but wondered if it was the right thing to do. It didn't seem so long ago he was holding Marty in his arms, an unbelievably tiny baby, all sticky and sleepy, his heart seared by a shockingly intense love. And now he sensed the bonds fraying, sensed that inwardly his son was laughing at him, that his son found him ridiculously old fashioned or uncool, or whatever the vernacular was these days.

"No homework then," said Phil, just to confirm it. Then he left Marty to his game and closed the bedroom door. As he turned away, he heard the squeal of brakes and the crunch of metal as Marty's virtual street racer was involved in a virtual pile up.

"Oh... BOLLOCKS!"

Phil bit his tongue; he was too tired to remonstrate and anyway perhaps "Bollocks" was no longer considered rude in the modern world either. Trevor, Phil's father in-law, used it all the time, and he was a retired Bank manager, whom Phil might have expected to know better.

Feeling the malodorous wind leaking out of him now, he slipped into the bathroom, sealed himself in, locked the door and settled down to do what he had to do. There was a time, pre-children, pre-marriage when the bathroom had provided a guarantee of privacy and quiet, but nowadays there was nothing like sitting on the toilet for making one of the kids come banging on the door, desperate for a wee.

Sure enough within moments, Marty was outside hopping from one foot to the next.

"You'll have to wait," said Phil, his patience thinning. But even kids of Marty's age tended to hold on until they were seconds away from wetting themselves – too busy with other stuff to waste time emptying their bladders until they definitely had to – so he knew Marty wasn't faking. Marty continued to hop and, with a groan, Phil decided to leave things half finished, so to speak, or he'd have Marty mimicking his bathroom noises as well just to hurry him along. Marty rushed in and feigned choking on the air. Phil felt humiliated, humiliated by his son, and his stomach gave another twist in protest.

The final soap of the evening was still running. No point in settling into the lounge, then. Sally would not tolerate interruptions during the soaps. It was still drizzling a little, and the light was fading, but he could feel himself growing hot, stifled, enclosed, and he had to cool down, so he put on an old jacket and hat, then headed out to the garden. It was too wet to mow of course, but he could perhaps move a hoe around the borders.

The shed was stuffed with the kids bikes and a massive football-cum-pool table that he'd held out against for months, before finally capitulating under a merciless onslaught of nagging and whining. They'd played with it for a week or so, then Sally had got fed up with it in the house, so it had been slung into the cabin, as he'd known it would. It made it a nightmare to get his mower out and he swore the next time he snagged himself on it, he'd saw the legs off and take it to the tip. They'd not touched the damned thing for ages now, *"because mummy won't let us have it in the house!"* And Sally wouldn't let Phil dump it, because it had cost a lot of money, and the kids were too idle to fetch it from the shed each time and set the damned thing up. So basically, it was in the way, and he couldn't do anything about it.

Phil looked at the solid wall of detritus in the cabin, at the football-cum-pool table sitting there like some giant four legged creature, sneering at him, and he felt his guts twist some more. He was ludicrously sensitive about the cabin, and had once tried to keep it fastidiously tidy, his tools neatly stored, a bit of old carpet on the floor. And sometimes, of a summer evening, he'd even sat in a deck-chair among the dust and cobwebs, with a book, or just thinking. It had been his sanctuary and he'd resisted the kids bikes for ages, preferring to have them in the garage, until Sally's Mini Cooper got scratched, and then it was goodbye to Phil's tidy little sanctuary. No one understood that these things mattered to him. Indeed what mattered to Phil was of no consequence at all, and it had been like that for so long he'd even begun to believe it himself.

When he was a kid, his father had kept a border collie that had

liked to sit at the top of the stairs. It was easy to step around it or over it, but it seemed the dog was always in the way and wouldn't do a damned thing Phil told it to. Then his dad had taught him not to squeeze around the dog but make it get up and move, so it knew its place, or next thing, said his dad, it would be growling at you to get out of its way. Phil guessed that's what they were doing with the kids – that before she was much older Elspeth would be telling him off for not doing her homework on time, and telling Sal off for not washing her clothes properly.

Having given up on the cabin, Phil now harboured the dream of a little Summer house – there was just room at the bottom of the garden. He could even sleep in there, he thought, during his less rational moments. I mean Sally would never countenance that, even though she'd no use for him in bed any more. It puzzled him: he wasn't needed much for anything really, but if he wasn't around she pulled a face. He had to sleep with her, so long as he didn't wake her when he came to bed, so long as he lay corpse-still, didn't snore, kept to his side of the bed, and of course, kept his hands to himself! It was more the appearance of the thing, he supposed. If he'd purposely avoided sleeping with her – even once in a blue moon, it would mean he didn't love her enough. The fact that he might actually *not* love Sally any more was something he did not allow himself to explore.

Anyway, Sally didn't want a Summer House – they were expensive and she saw no point in them. Instead, she wanted to extend the bedroom out over the garage, so she could have an en-suite bathroom that Phil struggled to see the need for, since the bathroom was directly across the hall anyway from the bedroom. It might stop the kids interrupting his bowel movements he supposed, except Sally had always made it plain the en-suite would be her private domain. He'd be allowed to urinate in it, she'd said, but not the "other" and the kids wouldn't be allowed in at all, not even to clean their teeth, since even that apparently innocuous activity sometimes resulted in globs of toothpaste hanging from the ceiling.

No, there was something about an en-suite that was obviously more than merely the sum of its sanitary-ware. It was a selling point, Trevor had said, and Trevor knew the market, and Phil had to agree most modern houses had them these days. Still, a Summer House would have been nice. One day.

The soil was wet and heavy. He was wasting his time persevering with it, but carried on doggedly for half an hour, just for the solitude it afforded him. Then Sally called out from the conservatory door. The soaps must have finished, he thought, and there was apparently no reality TV show to entertain her further that evening.

"You never talk to me," she was complaining, straight off. "You just

do your own thing and ignore me completely. I don't know why you bother coming home at all!"

Phil glanced at his watch – she'd be off to bed in another half an hour. "You were watching telly." he said, but that was an argument that never washed.

"Well, I'm not watching it now."

"Okay, fancy a cup of tea?"

"No. It'll keep me awake. Has Marty done his homework?"

"He says he hasn't got any."

"Are you sure? You know what he's like."

Phil was thinking that if Marty chose to lie to him, that was up to Marty. That if he didn't do his homework, that was up to Marty as well. He wasn't going to carry the lad around all his life.

"I don't know," said Phil. Was he sure? No, he was never sure where his kids were concerned. Yes, they both lied to him whenever they thought they could get away with it and no, he would never trust either of them to tell the truth. Sally scowled and Phil wondered what it must have been like to be so sick of life to make you scowl at it like that. He didn't feel that way, surely? All right, things were tiring, confusing, difficult as hell, but he was still looking for a way through while Sally appeared to have given up and the weight of it had crushed the breath from her. Or was it his fault? Was it living with him that had made her so miserable?

"Do you have to wear that hat?" she asked.

"Eh?"

"You do know they laugh at you wearing that."

"What? Who? The kids?"

"The whole street. My dad says..."

"It's raining," explained Phil, not particularly interested in what Trevor had to say on the subject of his hat, though he could imagine. And if anyone was laughing at him, it would be Trevor – Trevor, who'd never forgiven him for catching Trevor unawares and marrying his daughter.

"And those ear muffs you wear."

"Ear muffs?" This was a new one, thought Phil. "You mean my ear defenders. But I only wear them when I'm mowing."

"Well they make you look stupid!"

There was no smile; Sally's mood was really sour tonight.

"But the mower's noisy. It aggravates my ears. Makes them ring louder."

She sniffed. "You and your ears. How much did that acupuncture cost?"

Ah, now we're getting to it, thought Phil. "Em, twenty quid," he said, instinctively lowering the cost a fraction to take the sting out of

it. The wife correction factor, he called it. He didn't have the nerve to tell Sally he'd not actually had any acupuncture, but come away with just a handful of herbs instead.

"Twenty pounds!" She was appalled. "I hope it worked."

"Well not yet. I have to go back... em... maybe a few times."

"That's what *you* think. We can't afford to go throwing money away on stuff like that."

She was unusually argumentative, he thought. Indeed she seemed close to losing her temper, which wasn't like her at all.

"Sally, the tinnitus is really upsetting me. If I go for a few months it's no more than what it costs us for a few weeks shopping. And if it gets rid of it, it'll be worth it."

"Doctor Jackson told you it was incurable, that you should just get used to it. I agree with him. Get used to it."

Phil's guts were really burning now, the acid rising. "Jackson's an idiot," he said. "I went in with a ringing ear and came out with a prescription for antidepressants."

"And if you'd bothered to take them, you wouldn't be so grumpy now."

"Grumpy? I'm not grumpy."

"Then why are you raising your voice?"

He paused, bit his lip. "Sally, is everything okay? Has something happened?"

"Nothing," she said. "Everything's exactly the same as it always is."

Phil suspected this might be the problem. "Look, why don't we have a run out at the weekend?" he said. "Or better still, I'll get Rick to baby-sit on Saturday night, and we'll book a table at the Crown."

"The Crown's rubbish. Someone got food-poisoning there last week."

"Then we'll go to Mamma Mia's." Phil hated Mamma Mia's. It was too noisy, too lively for him, the tables set too close together so he always ended up uncomfortably near to someone else's armpit, but Sally liked it.

"All right, but I don't want Richard baby sitting. I'll ask my dad instead."

Phil's guts gave one last twist, and he felt himself going into shutdown. It was like a sinking feeling, a darkening, the shutters coming down in a last ditch attempt at self defence. He'd never understood Sally's dislike of his brother. Okay, Rick could be a little unconventional, and he dressed like a heavy metal rock star, though he was in his fifties. But he was a good man, and Phil loved him, loved his brother, while he barely tolerated Trevor, who was an overbearing ass. And they saw a lot of Trevor, while he hardly ever saw his brother!

He and Sally didn't argue over this, or anything really. They would each go so far until one of them touched the wrong button and caused the other to withdraw into a sullen silence – a silence that might last for days. And no amount of probing would break it, until the damned thing had run its course.

"What's up with you?"

"Nothing."

Phil hated it, but he couldn't help himself now. He lowered his eyes and turned to the hoe. "I'll just finish this off," he said, keeping his tone level and neutral. "Then I'll be in."

"Suit yourself!"

Sally collapsed into bed at nine. Elspeth had finally been wrestled undercover at eight thirty, while Marty was still shuffling about the kitchen, procrastinating, swallowing large quantities of orange cordial and then twisting out one long slovenly belch after the other.

"Marty, please!"

"Eh? What's up, Dad? Can I watch Top Gear?"

"No you can't. You've been told to go to bed. Now go."

"But all my mates at school watch it."

"Marty, go to bed... NOW!"

Guilt. It was the last stress of the day – settling the house down, and the kids always seemed to push their luck, so Phil couldn't help but finally lose his rag and send them off with the impression of a ratty father. It was going up for ten now, and the house was not so much settling as shuddering to a halt. He'd wanted to read, but found that by now he simply wasn't in the mood. The house hung raw and ragged like flayed meat all around him, and he could feel himself itching for the whisky bottle to make everything soft and smooth again.

Wine and whisky – how much did that cost in a month? If he cut that out, he could easily pay for the acupuncture, and that would stop Sally moaning about it, except Sally drank as much as he did. Oh, he hoped the acupuncture worked, otherwise he'd have to pretend. Imagine that: ears still ringing, yet pretending they were fine – oh and not wearing his ear defenders because they made him look stupid, and his family were embarrassed for him. Oh... and his hat! He must not wear his hat! But how they knew the whole street was laughing at him was a mystery because no one in the street ever spoke to them!

His head was spinning now. He poured himself a very large whisky, while listening for Marty. A final belch from the bathroom told him the lad was about five minutes away from bed. It was close enough. He flopped down on the sofa with his laptop and his whisky and let out a groan. The laptop had been a particularly difficult thing to acquire. In the end he'd had to lie to Sally, telling her it belonged to

work. He'd actually paid cash for it at PC World, cash he'd accumulated by squirrelling away the odd tenner here and there over a period of a few years. He needed it for his diary. The diary was of vital importance. It was his only confidant, his only listener. Without it, he'd go mad.

Phil had kept a diary since he was a teenager. It helped to calm his nerves, get the crap out of his system. But private diaries and married life did not go hand in hand. He'd made the mistake early on of trusting the sanctuary of the diary. I mean reading someone else's diary was something you simply did not do, did you? Unless you were a woman. Or at least one woman in particular who seemed not to understand you never wrote the good stuff in there. You only wrote the bad stuff, the dark stuff, the stuff you had to get out of your system, the snatches of anger, the fleeting moments of despair. And though they were a transient thing for the writer, the diary preserved them for all time, giving the reader an impression of a very miserable and misanthropic author.

Sally had got burned that way early on, thinking to satisfy her curiosity, and not realising the depth of things Phil kept to himself. She had not understood them, not understood how deadly dangerous diaries were.

Marty's driving me up the bloody wall! Four hour feeds, small hours of the morning. Getting to work somehow, brain dead, sick of the smell of shit and baby milk. Don't know how much more I can take!

He'd come home to an hysterical and still postnatal Sally, who'd thrown the diary at him, told him to get out if he was going, that she'd manage on her own.

"But it's just a diary," said Phil, weakly. "They're full of rubbish. You write it all down to get it out of your system."

But there was no use explaining how important a diary was to him. This was not a time for exploring the intricacies of the male psyche.

"You're obviously not happy," she countered.

"Well who is? It's impossible to be happy all the time. It's just unfortunate we only seem to write about the times when we're not happy."

It was serious though. He'd never seen her so upset. He'd felt guilty and worthless for days, before realising it wasn't his fault at all, that she should not have read the diary. The only good part was that, so far as he could work out, she'd not read enough to discover his other secret: Caroline.

Now, that would really have put the tin lid on it, as they say.

CHAPTER 4

Another problem with the diary was Mrs Emmeline Parker, or Mrs Nosy Parker, as Phil preferred to call her. This was the woman Trevor, Sally's father, had engaged to clean their house for them. She also cleaned for Trevor, was possibly providing other more personal services for him, and Phil didn't trust her. He felt his life was an open book, literally, that anything readable in the house would be reported back: payslips, bank statements, diaries – also the number of wine bottles in the recycling container, the number of condoms used in a month – none at all this month, Mr Lomax!

She was the spy in his midst and Phil didn't trust a vulnerable diary with her on the prowl, not even in a locked drawer. So he'd tried a coded diary for a while, rather a clever system he'd thought, and one he found quite effective. It even enabled him to write his diary brazenly in front of Sally and the children, secure in the knowledge that his feelings were safe. But of course a coded diary was like a red rag to a bull. It had to be something bad, Sally told him, if he was writing it in code, that there should be no secrets between a man and wife, that if Phil loved her, he'd let her read his diary, or stop writing it. I mean, she didn't keep one, did she? How would he feel if she did? He wouldn't mind, he'd replied, but to Sally that implied he simply didn't care enough about her to be interested, that he did not love her enough.

But I do love you Sal!

Then prove it! Stop keeping the diary!

The only kind of diary to keep in a marriage, Phil concluded, was a secret one, and the only really secret diary you could ever have was an encrypted computer text-file. He didn't even keep the diary on the laptop itself – the kids used that sometimes and Sally wasn't beyond picking it up and asking what this file was with the key-symbol. No, he kept it on his MP3 player, and carried it around in his pocket.

Saw acupuncturist, he wrote. *Not hopeful. Also going to be expensive in long run. Sally does not approve. Surprise! She thinks I'm mad believing in that sort of thing. Doctor Lin was fortyish maybe? V. Pretty, though thank God she was not Caroline! Getting better at avoiding her these days.*

He'd first met Caroline in September 1977. In this one and only instance, Caroline was her real name and she'd recently moved into the old Piggot place, across the road with her mother. He'd been living at home with the old man then, and Richie. He'd just started work and would catch the bus into Wigan one day a week to attend his day-release H.N.C. course. Caroline was doing A levels at college and would catch a different bus, one that left from the other side of the

road from his stop. They'd set out about the same time, those dewy September mornings, and Phil would try to coincide his departure with hers so they might share the five minute walk to the bus stop together. He was curious about girls, curious about sex and wondered if Caroline might be his first girlfriend.

Things rarely worked out though, because for some mysterious reason his timing was always off. He'd just miss her, or she'd get a lift from a neighbour or something. On the occasions when he timed it right, his heart would leap at the possibility of speaking to her, but it would always end up with him just tailing along behind her, tongue tied and feeling stupid. Then he'd kick himself all day for being a coward, at not even having gone up and said "hi", let alone asking her on a date.

So, he was seventeen and believed himself to be in love with Caroline. But he was in love with her solely because he could not get out of love by getting to know her. Instead he imagined her as he would have liked her to be, imagined her in such detail that she became someone else entirely. Phil understood all of this now, understood that she was most likely not the girl he had imagined her to be at all, but some sort of idealised fantasy. However, to the seventeen year old Phil, his veins bursting with hormones, she was a girl, and he'd wanted her to like him, wanted it with all his heart.

The Caroline affair was brief, he wrote, in one of his retrospective moments, *barely six months of fruitless mooning, and hoping. Then she got pregnant by some guy at college which made it easier for me to move on.*

But then came other girls, one after the other, or even several at the same time. It was odd: he'd think he was safe, and suddenly there would come a pretty face for him to fasten his hopes on anew and fall in love all over again. In between these unrequited infatuations came the occasional girlfriend. The girlfriends seemed to sneak up on him unawares though and he could never remember if he'd asked them out, or they'd just turned up on his doorstep. There was a Jessica, a Sophie, and a Katie, and though it was to Katie he'd lost his virginity on the back seat of his Cortina one night in the summer of '82, he'd always felt there was something lacking in all these girls, some tarnished imperfection, for they were simply none of them Carolines.

Sally was different. He did love Sally, or perhaps, at twenty four, he was just that bit older and less idealistic in his expectations. He remembered kissing her for the first time outside her parents' house one night and feeling himself melt. Sally later told him she hadn't felt anything at all, which ruined it of course, but he'd decided Sally was the girl for him anyway, because she sort of "fitted" him. He even liked her coolness. He read it as a sexy aloofness, and longed to melt

through into her deeper layers, set fire to her and have her set fire to him.

The most shocking thing though was that he continued meeting Carolines after he'd got married. I mean, he was happily married, he supposed, and it puzzled him he could continue these fantasies of love, this madness that made him long for a woman to like him, a woman who wanted to know him. He supposed it was because, except for the periods that Sally wanted to get pregnant, she did not seem to want to know him after all, and worse, it seemed her sexy aloofness had turned out to be just aloofness. Perhaps girls didn't like sex, generally, I mean not in the way that men did, he thought, and those porno flicks where all the girls were gagging for a suck on your dick, were a load of rubbish.

Phil once read that men thought about sex a thousand times a day, and reasoned that it was probably correct, while he wondered if Sally ever thought about sex at all. And really, once the children came along she seemed to lose interest in him altogether. Was that fair? I mean how easy was he to get to know anyway? This man with a secret diary?

CHAPTER 5

Doctor Lin was encouraged by the fact Phil had turned up again. This was his fourth visit, and still with little to show for it. Business was slack and she needed to keep hold of him somehow – not that she'd twist money out of him unnecessarily – he definitely needed the attention. The problem was getting people to pay for the attention they needed. One day she might be able to offer her treatments on the National Health Service, but that was a long time off, she thought; for now, she knew most Western doctors believed that what she did was a triumph of ignorance over reason. As for the money, it cost more for people to have their hair permed in the salon next door than she charged to heal their aches and pains, and it was galling that the salon was always full, while she saw barely one client a day.

He was well dressed, this Mr Philip Markham: decent watch, good quality shoes, quality shirt. He was not terribly rich, though, she thought, or he would not be seeing her. He'd be visiting practitioners with posher clinics in Preston or Manchester, clinics with receptionists and glossy advertising fliers. But he had money – not that this was her primary consideration; she was a doctor after all and the relief of suffering was her vocation. But a girl still had to eat.

She smiled. "Mr Markham. You have nice tie."

"Tie?... oh... em. Thank you."

"I think we try acupuncture today. Okay?"

Phil was relieved. He was feeling a little better in himself, not so tired perhaps, but the ears were still ringing miserably and he desperately wanted something to work – desperately wanted not to have been wrong about this Chinese Medicine business.

"Okay, Doctor. You're the boss."

She told him to take off his jacket and shoes and to lie on the couch. He felt an unexpected sexual stirring as she slid his socks down but that was brought to an abrupt end when the first pins went into his ankles.

"OUCH!"

"Must relax please," said Doctor Lin.

It didn't hurt exactly, but he'd felt it more than he'd been led to believe. The pins were like silver hairs, though he tried not to look. Doctor Lin seemed to rest them against his skin, as if waiting for something, or sensing something, before gently pressing them in. More pins went into the backs of his hands, his neck, face, and the top of his head. Then she turned the lights down and lit a vanilla-scented candle. "Relax, Mr Markham," she said. "Twenty minutes. If you need me I am in the next room. Just call, okay?"

Phil would have replied except the pins in his face seemed to discourage him from speaking, so he nodded, but only slightly because the pins in his neck discouraged that as well.

Soothing music began to play and Phil tried to relax. The pins felt like fingers against his skin, pressing all over. It was weird, but not unpleasant. And the music would have been nice, he thought, except for his ringing ears. He remembered how erotic her fingers had felt on his ankles – cool and smooth – but he chided himself at once.

Don't be stupid. Do you want Caroline to find you here and spoil this?

"But Dr Lin's not married," said Caroline. "No wedding ring. She's good looking, and about the right age. She might have feelings for you!"

"Damn you, Caroline," he thought. "Leave me alone! I know you. I know all your tricks now."

Doctor Lin returned after twenty minutes and withdrew the pins smartly, dabbing at his skin with cotton wool. Was he bleeding, he wondered? He supposed he must have been, though he didn't care to check. It could only be a tiny bead at the most, he thought, somewhat queasily.

"Feel all right?"

"Em... fine, yes. Ears still ringing though."

She nodded. "Might make it easier tomorrow, after sleep. You must sleep plenty, Mr Markham. Remove shirt, please."

"Eh?.. oh... of course."

She came behind him and began to massage his neck. He liked the scent of her, liked the feel of her cool, strong fingers. Why was she wearing scent? Did she need to massage him, or was that just an excuse to touch him.

Leave me alone, Caroline!

"Very stiff neck, Mr Markham," she said. "Like wood. You use computer a lot?"

"Yes."

"Computers very bad."

"Yes, but necessary, I'm afraid."

"Use computer at work?"

"All day. Then again at home."

"Very bad. Mr Markham, I warn you, is not easy. Tinnitus very stubborn. Take time. You see me more weeks. This is my understanding. Yes? I can help you, but take time. Be patient. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Must change life-of-style."

"Eh? Oh... lifestyle? Yes. Yes, I will!"

"No more late night, Mr Markham."

"Yes, yes. I promise."

"And do Tai Chi."

"Tai Chi?"

"Tai Chi will help you. This is my understanding. Yes?"

"Em... if you say so, Doctor."

"I teach Tai Chi Sunday morning, ten o'clock. Community centre. Robin Hill. Five pounds. You come?"

"Em... I don't know... I'll have to ask my wife."

"Yes. You tell your wife. Do Tai Chi! Very good for you. Bring Mrs Markham. She will enjoy it."

Leaving the surgery, Phil felt a little strange. He was thinking about the Tai Chi thing, but as he walked back to the car, he realised he was aching, and suddenly dog tired. By the time he got home and negotiated his entry via the fiasco of the keys, he felt like he'd been run over by a truck. His tea was in the oven. He examined it, considered it, balanced it against the way he was feeling, then scraped it into the bin and went to bed.

He slept like he'd been drugged, woke up next morning, ravenously hungry and feeling like a new man, strong, bright, and seemingly a hundred years younger than the old crock he'd steered to bed the night before. It was outrageous though, what he'd done: thrown his tea away like that and gone to bed without a word. In the subtle codes of his quiet marriage, it was akin to smashing all the windows and murdering his children.

When he came home from work that night, Sally wasn't in. According to the note she'd taken the children with her to her fathers. Back at bedtime, she'd said. No, she'd not left him, he thought, though he supposed if she had, he could not have felt more keenly the sense of emptiness and abandonment. It was at times like this, he told himself, he realised how much he loved her, how much he missed her! But sometimes it seemed the person he really loved was no longer there. A stranger had come along and taken over her body, making the once vivacious and lovely Sally simply cross and cold.

She confided more in her father than in him, he thought. Any upset at all, whether he was at the bottom of it or not, and she instantly thought of the old man. Once, she'd got a puncture on the way home from the library and hadn't the sense to call the RAC. from the car, herself. Instead, she'd called her father, who'd called the RAC.When she was explaining this to Phil, laughing it all off as they shared an evening glass of wine, he'd felt a pang of jealousy, which was ridiculous really. Why hadn't she thought to call him?

Phil considered his options now. He could stay at home and meekly await her return, await some confrontation about his tea-dumping behaviour, her lines memorised at her father's knee – but this was not an appealing option. Or, he could go out, get smashed,

then roll home late, and face double the music tomorrow. That was tempting, but he doubted he had the constitution to survive such a thing any more, plus he had work in the morning and Doctor Lin had advised him both to rest more and cut down on the booze. And right now Doc Lin's word was God.

What to do then? Well, he could always go and have a chat with Richie.

CHAPTER 6

Richie lived alone in what Phil had come to consider a bachelor's paradise – an old terraced cottage on the outskirts of town, with a long, narrow garden running off into a meadow beyond. There was peace and wind chimes, and the soothing sound of a water feature trickling nearby. Phil had tried to recreate that atmosphere at home, but Sally had complained the tinkle of wind chimes gave her a headache and the sound of running water made her want the toilet all the time. As for the peace – well you could just forget that until the kids left home in another ten years or so.

At the age of 54, Richie was enjoying his chosen stereotype: Long grey hair, neatly trimmed beard and moustache, loud waistcoat, Led Zep T-shirt, and jeans. But the watch that nestled in the waistcoat pocket was their father's, and Phil knew there was nothing superficial about that. The case was solid silver, hallmarked 1885, a full hunter, made in Prescot and with a movement so ornate it had always dazzled Phil as a child whenever his father had shown it to him. Richie was the eldest son, so it was right and proper that he'd got the watch, and he clearly treasured it. For all their differences in character, both he and Richie had fond memories of their father.

Richie’s eyes were wide and he'd just paused half way through lifting a can of Carlsberg to his lips. "Acupuncture? You?"

The house was about twenty minutes walk away from Phil's, but Phil couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his brother. Six months maybe? It was another of those peculiarities that came with marriage. Sally simply couldn't stand Richie, but wouldn't actually go so far as to say so.

"I'm just off to Richie’s, Sal."

"Can I come Dad?"

"Sure you can, Marty."

"Me too!"

"Course, Elspeth. Go find your shoes."

But Sally was always ready with an excuse for why she couldn't go with them.

"It doesn't matter, love. I'll take the kids on my own, give you some peace."

"But it looks bad, if I'm not there, like I don't want to go or something."

Well, you don't, Phil would think.

"I'm sorry but I've really got to finish this work. There's a meeting tomorrow." Or: "I'd come but I've got my period."

So Phil would feel guilty about putting Sally in that position, and

the upshot was he wouldn't go either. So he and Richie had sunk to exchanging furtive e-mails instead – except for the occasional rare visit, like this one.

"What's wrong with acupuncture?" said Phil, in response to Richie's raised eyebrow.

"Well, nothing. It just seems bit alternative for you."

"You'll try anything when you're desperate."

"Ear still bothering you?"

Phil nodded.

"Could it not just be stress? Wife and kids? When I look at you, I realise how lucky I am."

"It's not that bad, Richie. "

Richie tossed him a can and grew serious. "Isn't it?"

"Really, it's not that bad," said Phil again, hoping he could convince himself by the repetition. "Sally's tired. Stressed all the time. Problems at work, then home to the kids and their whining. And the kids aren't bad – I mean all kids whine these days. It's part of their training for the consumer society, like a marketing tool – just something else we have to put up with as parents. And you can't expect things to be plain sailing all the time."

"And how's your job? I heard that place was on its knees."

Phil shrugged. "It manages to keep going. There are fewer and fewer of us though. Machines clapped out, the far east snapping at our heels all the time. It is worrying, I suppose."

"It must be. You've been there for ever! I bet you don't go moaning to Sally about it though."

"I don't want to add to her problems, Richie. Anyway, look I came to ask you if you knew anything about Tai Chi."

Richie stroked his beard thoughtfully. "First you tell me you're having acupuncture, and now you want to know about Tai Chi? What does Sally think of all this?"

"I don't know. I've not told her about the Tai Chi yet. As for the acupuncture, she just says it's expensive and I'll have to stop going."

"But is it working?"

Phil sighed. "Not yet. But I'm feeling better in other ways – more relaxed and not as tired all the time. The kids don't wind me up like they used to do either. I'd really like to keep going – it's not that we can't afford it, it's just that Sal doesn't believe in that sort of thing. So far as she's concerned it can't possibly be working and it's a complete waste of money. But what about this Tai Chi thing, Richie? Have you heard of it?"

"Well, it's like slow motion exercises, a martial art sort of thing. You see people doing it in China in the parks of a morning. Something to do with Qi."

"Qi? Doc Lin mentioned Chi, but I don't get it."

"It's like a life force, vital energy. It doesn't exist as far as us rational westerners are concerned, but it must exist really, otherwise your acupuncture wouldn't be working."

"I'm not sure it is working. I've only had one session. The other times it's been herbs and massage."

"Well something's changed. I've never seen you looking so well. Last time I saw you I thought Sally wasn't feeding you or something."

"You really think I look okay? I do feel better. So you think I should do it, this Tai Chi?"

"Why not? If nothing else it'll get you out of the house."

"I don't know what to tell Sally, though."

"Tell Sally it will save you some money on the acupuncture – that you won't need as many sessions. Put it like that and she can't refuse."

"I don't know. That sounds a bit deceitful."

"What's deceitful about it? Anyway, I thought that's what marriage was all about: deceit. Otherwise you'd never get along."

"As if you'd know, never having been married."

"And looking at you creeping around on eggshells all the time, I know why not. Seriously, Phil, you both seem afraid of being who you really are in case the other person doesn't like it – both of you afraid to change in case it rocks the boat too much, so you're both trapped into being something you're not, and all because you imagine the other person prefers you that way."

Phil nodded. His brother looked ridiculous, and let's face it, he enjoyed looking ridiculous, enjoyed playing up to the stereotype, enjoyed being childish. But he was wise, and relaxed and cool in his own way, and Phil had always admired him for it. Except Richie wasn't happy. Sure he was relaxed and cool, but he was also lonely. But then wasn't Phil lonely too?

"So what's a bloke to do then, Rich? Leave as soon as the going gets tough. Hurt three people for the sake of making your own life a little easier?"

"People say its better for the kids in the long term if you cut and run early on."

"They do say that don't they? But it's bollocks. Okay, it's not going to do a child any good if he sees his parents slagging each other off all the time or beating each other black and blue, but those are extreme cases. Sally and I aren't like that. We're terribly polite about it and we don't air our differences in front of them... or much in private for that matter either. Sally's anger is always more subtle."

Richie listened. He knew Phil was in the thick of life, while he'd spent his whole life dodging it, trying to freeze time some time in the latter part of his teens. "But what about *your* anger? Does she ever see

your anger? I mean even subtly? I doubt it. You just swallow it and say, thank you very much dear."

"No I don't! I get angry sometimes."

"But do you show it, Phil? Listen, this is me you're talking to. Remember that time when we were lads and we were bickering about something, and I pushed you into the canal?"

Phil laughed. "Do I!"

"You should have kicked my head in for that, but you just swallowed your anger, along with half the canal."

"I couldn't be angry, Richie. I saw the expression on your face as you pulled me out. You were horrified at what you'd done. "

"I know. I'm still sorry I did it."

"And you've been apologising for it for thirty years."

He smiled. "Have I? You probably deserved it. You were teasing me about going out with Rachel Green as I recall."

"Was I? That's because I fancied her as well."

"I know you did. We were both lucky there. The woman would have destroyed us both. Go and try your Tai Chi, Phil. Sally can't exactly say you're never in, or always down the pub or something. And it's not like the kids can't wipe their own arses these days."

Phil recalled the excrement and urine smeared all over the toilet seat the last time he'd gone in, and longed for the days when he had wiped the kids arses for them.

CHAPTER 7

Sunday mornings were usually non-existent, both Phil and Sally lying in until eleven if they could manage it, while the kids played in their rooms. Phil didn't see the problem then, since the Tai Chi began at nine, and he'd be back for ten thirty anyway, so he would hardly be missed. As for the lie in – it was worth sacrificing it, if it would help to ease the hissing and jangling in his ear.

But Sally wasn't sure. Phil had never been a "joiner", she reminded him, and of course she asked how much it was going to cost, but she couldn't really put up much of a fight over a fiver, so she shrugged in that way that made Phil feel like a piece of gum stuck to the bottom of her shoe. He wished she'd take more of an interest in him. She complained all the time that she didn't know what he was thinking or feeling, but whenever he tried to speak about such things, he had the impression he was boring her. She'd look away mid-sentence, or cut in and start to tell him about something that had happened at the Library, as if she'd forgotten he was speaking at all.

"So it's okay if I go then?"

"Suit yourself, but don't expect me to get up with you."

Phil had expected no such thing. Why would she have got up with him anyway? She never got up early with him. What was she on about?

The Community Centre on Robin Hill was a hundred years old, dimly lit and had the damp and musty smell of church halls and scout huts everywhere. Doctor Lin greeted him with a girlish smile that settled him at once. It was silly, he was a mature man, but he'd been nervous about coming, feeling like a little boy on his first day at school. She was wearing what appeared to be a pair of yellow silk pyjamas. There was Chinese music playing, the scales unfamiliar, almost alien to him, but somehow calming and curiously emotive.

She looked both pleased and surprised to see him. "Mr Markham. You came!"

"Em... yes. I'm a little early." She's definitely not a Caroline, he kept thinking. She couldn't be –Caroline would not have known his name.

"Ears still ringing?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

She frowned. "Give it time. I'm sure it will get better."

Others began to arrive – an elderly lady smiled sweetly at Phil and introduced herself very politely as Lara Walters. Phil was taken aback by her almost old-world gentility and her easy charm. Then came a bear of a man with a beard hanging down his chest and a pony tail. He didn't offer his name. He avoided eye contact and took up a

position far away from everyone. Others turned up, a mixed bag, mostly middle aged, one very senior gentleman in his eighties dressed in silk pyjamas, like Doctor Lin's, and Phil hoped he would not be expected to wear them as well. Silk pyjamas seemed a bit... feminine, a bit kinky to him, or was that just his dirty mind, and a hidden complex about cross-dressing? As he scanned the crowd, he relaxed, but then to his dismay a prospective Caroline came in towards the end, rather a severe looking woman with the most impressive derrière Phil had seen for a long, long time.

Recognising Carolines had become second nature to him now. For ages he'd thought these women were all different, and it was only recently he'd worked out that, since he didn't know their real selves, this feeling he got was for something in himself that he projected onto them. It hadn't made the stupid infatuations any easier to bear, or indeed to escape, that is until he'd begun calling these projections "Caroline". That usually did the trick, and once identified, Caroline would slip away somewhere quietly for a while and leave him alone.

As for him leaving Caroline alone, that wasn't usually a problem. In his pre-marriage days, he knew that if you loitered, waiting for a Caroline who passed by the same spot every day, the day you purposely waited was the day she would not turn up. If you chose a seat on the bus behind the one a Caroline always sat in, that day she would miss the bus. Carolines were not to be pinned down or approached. They were merely an instrument of self-inflicted torture, and his only defence was vigilance, as well as being able to recognise her through her various cunning disguises. He'd been lucky with Doc Lin – Caroline had ducked out of there pretty quick.

Phil averted his eyes from the woman's derrière. "Nice one, Caroline," he said to himself, almost smiling at her ingenuity – a well padded female bottom was a particular weakness of his. He took up a position as far away from her as possible and he thought: "I've spotted you, so you might as well just clear off now and leave me alone!"

Phil enjoyed the class, ignoring everyone except Doc Lin, on whose voice he found he had to concentrate really hard in order to understand her idiosyncratic grammar. He understood she had come from China only a year ago with no English at all, and though he struggled to understand what she said at times, he admired her for her pluck. Each time he saw her though, he felt her English was improving and he marvelled that anyone could be so intelligent.

She seemed less formal in front of the class than she did when sticking pins into him, even attempting a joke now and then. Doc Lin demonstrated the Tai Chi form with a lithe and supple body that was the envy of all the women there. With the exception of Caroline they were all wooden and stiff with age. Phil managed better than he'd

thought he would – even bending forward and reaching his toes during the warm-up, for which Doctor Lin complimented him and made him blush.

For an hour, they breathed and bent, and twisted their limbs gently to the strains of a cheap music player, and afterwards, Doc Lin invited them to share tea. Lara was looking a little flushed and Phil asked if he could bring her a cup. She thanked him, and he sat down with her, one wary eye on Caroline, who was trying, unsuccessfully, to engage the hairy bear of a man in conversation.

"That's very kind of you, Mr Markham."

"Phil, please. Its no bother. Is this your first time, Mrs Walters?"

"Lara. No, I've been coming for a few weeks now. It gets me ever so warm, but I do enjoy the serene feeling afterwards. Do you feel it?"

Phil thought for a moment. He felt warm too, and there was a soothing tingle in his bones, but his mind was already haunted by the image of Sally looking at her watch and tut-tutting. Then, no doubt, there would be the fiasco of the keys. *Oh, crap –don't think about it Phil – not yet.*

"Calm, yes," he said. "I suppose I do."

"You must practice every day," she said. "Like Doctor Lin says. You'll feel the benefit of it very quickly, I assure you."

"I'll try. Tell me are you a patient of Doc Lin's? No... forgive me... that's none of my business."

"Nonsense. I was a patient for a while, but I couldn't afford to keep seeing her every week. It's rather expensive, but she's such a lovely woman and I didn't want to offend her, so when she suggested the class I decided to come along, as it was the cheaper option, and it gets me out of the house. What about you?"

"Yes, the same really, though I'm still seeing her. But you're right: it is expensive, and I'm not sure if it's working."

"If she's told you she can cure you, then it will work, I'm sure."

"Yes,.. I just have to give it time."

"It's nothing... serious, I hope..."

"Oh... no, just a ringing ear. Annoying though."

"How distressing for you! I do hope it gets better soon."

"Thank you. Anyway, I'd better get back to my wife."

Lara Walters misunderstood and began to scan the remaining students for the woman who might be Phil's wife.

"No, no," said Phil. "My wife's at home. This isn't really her sort of thing at all."

"Ah... you came alone?"

"Yes... well, see you next week perhaps, Lara."

"I do hope so, Philip."

Caroline had given up on the hairy bear man and decided to go

home. Her Corsa was parked next to Phil's Mondeo and he hung back when he saw her because if he wasn't careful he'd be on top of her and there'd be an awkward moment as they each tried to squeeze into their cars and he might even end up having to speak to her. Funny though: her car being parked right next to his like that. If he'd wanted it to be, she would have parked around the corner or come on the bus or something. Now that was weird! Perhaps she wasn't a Caroline after all.

Sally didn't mention the Tai Chi. He arrived home, showered and settled down with his paper, feeling calm and relaxed, even managing to laugh good-naturedly when Marty came to him with a month long project on glacial systems that he'd not started yet and required handing in tomorrow morning.

"Can't you just say the dog ate it?"

Marty looked at him as if he'd gone mad, then slunk away.

Sally was staring at him.

Phil was nonplussed. "What?"

"I told him you'd help him out when you came back from your hippy-dippy class."

"My what? Well... what can I do? Does he expect me to write it out for him? It's about a hundred years since I last did any geography. He's better qualified to do it than I am... I mean, having had the advantage of actually attending the class – or does he want me to do that for him as well? Perhaps I should suggest he stays at home tomorrow and I'll go to school for him instead. I don't think I'd mind actually – make a change from going to work."

Phil rewound all of this in his head while Sally gawked at him, speechless. Had he really said all of that? No, surely not! He was not cross at all, still quite relaxed and the words had tripped out smoothly and easily, like a reasonable answer to a reasonable question.

"He forgot to do it," said Sally. "You could help him out this once. Save him getting into trouble."

"The best thing we could do to help is write his teacher a note saying he forgot, accidentally on purpose, and to give him a roasting with our blessing."

"But he's only twelve!"

"And in a few months he'll be thirteen. I never bothered my parents with my homework. I just got on and did it, because I knew I'd get told off if I didn't."

"But it's different now..."

"No it's not. The only thing that's different is nowadays we take it personally if our kids screw up. What's the diameter of the earth Elspeth?"

"How should I know, Daddy?"

"Good girl... why bother learning rubbish like that when you can always get someone else to look it up for you?"

It was building to a climax and Phil seemed to be watching from somewhere inside himself while he steered his relationship into unknown territory.

"Well if you won't help, I'll ring my dad and see if he'll come and do it."

Phil winced. Ooh, nice one, Sal, he thought. Straight for the jugular. Beat him over the head with his own ego. Except Phil's ego, ever-ready to flare up into troublesome proportions at the merest mention of Sally's father, was curiously absent.

"Well, I still think Marty should get himself out of this one but, if you insist, be my guest. And while you're on the phone you could ask your dad if he's finished with my hedge clippers. He could bring them with him when he comes."

"If you're going to be funny about it. I'll go round to his house."

"Okay... but Trevor's not got the Internet – no access to Wikipedia, you see?"

"I'm sure we'll manage. You're all right getting your own lunch are you?"

"Sure."

"I mean, I don't want the kitchen looking like a bomb site when we come back."

Phil nodded, his heart sinking. He'd driven home feeling so calm, so blessed. Now he felt cursed and frayed around the edges again. And all he had to do was blag a few pictures from the Internet and splatter some plagiarised paragraphs around them, make it look like it had taken him a month, then add a touch of authenticity by subtly sabotaging the grammar and spelling, and sprinkling "innit" around at random intervals. That's all it would have taken to restore calm, and ease the burning in his guts. But then he heard the roar of a virtual racing car coming from Marty's room and suspected the project didn't need handing in tomorrow at all, that Marty had only been trying to spur his parents into action by exaggerating the urgency of the situation.

"That's fine," he said, picturing Marty's face when he was dragged from his Game Station to go and visit his grandfather to work on glacial systems. "I have to mow anyway; the front garden's looking a bit shaggy. Have you seen my hat, Elspeth?"

As he clipped round the front lawn, he began to feel the guilt settling in. They'd been away an hour now, and the house felt empty without them. He still felt he'd been right, and was upset that Sally hadn't seen things his way. But he'd been wrong to rub it in with that parting gesture about the hat. He'd even waved it at them as they'd

sped away, Sally's mouth set, and Marty with a face that would have soured milk.

Phil thought back on all of this as he sat at his works computer rattling off e-mails the next morning. It was a pity much of the worlds business was like this nowadays, and he missed the times when they'd spent more time actually making things. But if this was the way of the world, then he had to accept it, he thought – accept also the possibility he was becoming as obsolete as the machine tools he worked with. He was feeling unusually magnanimous that morning – also exceptionally energetic, exceptionally sharp.

He was also plotting an elaborate revenge.

Monday was when Mrs Nosy Parker came to clean. Phil had laid the usual markers on his private drawers – bedside and his study desk – bits of matchstick, that he usually found on the carpet when he came home. Mrs Nosy Parker would be in his drawers now, he thought, counting his condoms, and riffling through his bank statements. There was a limit to what he could do about this, as Sally was always willing to give the woman the benefit of the doubt – even when Phil pointed out that Mrs Nosy Parker had also been rooting through her underwear drawer. Checking for what, he wondered? Anything too racy? Too revealing?

"She was obviously just putting something away, Phil."

Sally was unfazed and perhaps it was unreasonable of him, but he felt he had the right to a private life. So, he'd moved the condoms and the bank-statements – Sally's underwear was a matter for her – and he'd put innocuous books and stationery in their place. But suddenly the mischievous side of him had come up with a wicked idea, one that had him tittering childishly to himself. He'd been on the Internet and ordered a generously proportioned fluorescent dildo, a pair of furry handcuffs and a riding crop – also rather a racy and graphically illustrated book that went through a wide variety of sexual positions and "fringe" practices. He would never in a million years have had the nerve to buy these things from a shop, even had there been one within fifty miles of Middleton, but the Internet made such things relatively easy, and anonymous.

He would give Mrs Nosy Parker a shock, he thought – burn her fingers hopefully, but also give her something worthwhile reporting back to Trevor – have Sally's father in a fluster and asking awkward questions. So, they thought he was an idiot with his hat and his ear defenders, did they? Well, let them think he was a sex maniac as well!

CHAPTER 8

"Remove shirt please."

Phil responded eagerly. It was the most exquisite part of the week, having Doc Lin massage his back, and not in a sexual fantasy sort of way either. It just felt so damned good, and it was all he could do to prevent himself moaning with pleasure as she went to work on him.

"Enjoy Tai Chi?"

"Very much," he replied. "Though there's obviously a lot to learn. I'll definitely be there again on Sunday. Have you been doing it long?"

"All my life," she said. "Learn from early age. Prevention better than cure? This is my understanding, Mr Markham."

"Yes, quite right."

"You practice at home?"

"Em, a little," he lied.

He'd begun to warm up one evening, but found the children gawking at him in amazement. Then Marty had sneered at him and begun mimicking the arm movements in a ridiculously wooden and insulting way. Sally had raised her eyes in dismay at his embarrassing actions and had told him later that under no circumstances was he ever to let the neighbours catch him doing it.

"Actually, my family think I'm mad," he said.

"Yes, this is my understanding."

"No... my family..."

"Yes, yes, relax now, Mr Markham. Your neck is very stiff today. Problems at work?"

"Just... problems. Life, you know?"

"Ah yes. Life. Keep up with Tai Chi. Must practice, Mr Markham. Make you a new man!"

The next Sunday, Phil actually felt light hearted as he drove to Robin Hill and the community centre. He'd carved out a piece of time for himself, away from his family. It was the first time he'd ever done it and he didn't feel guilty at all. His light heartedness was only slightly dented when Caroline's Corsa pulled up smartish, right beside him, on the car park. She was a persistent one, he thought. Couldn't she see he was onto her? He hastened his exit, locked the car and stepped away briskly before she had the chance to catch his eye – not that she would, I mean that was ridiculous: this was Caroline after all. Had he waited for her, she would have cut him dead and made him feel a fool.

Phil took up a position in the hall between a twinkly Lara Walters and the Hairy Bear Man. Lara smiled warmly at him and the Hairy Bear Man gave him a faint nod which Phil took as a triumph of

recognition. Then Caroline stood directly behind him. That felt really bad, having her eyes on his back, so he removed his watch and walked to the side of the hall, under pretence of putting it in his jacket, which lay on a bench. Then he took up a position a comfortable distance away from her.

The class began with the warm-up exercises that had so embarrassed his family. Then, Doc Lin began to talk about a movement called Silk Reeling, which she proceeded to demonstrate with a slow sweeping hand movement that Phil found immediately mesmerising, and he knew he'd enjoy doing it. His hands were already itching to follow.

After half an hour of Silk Reeling, Phil was feeling very pleased with himself but then, to his dismay, Dr. Lin called him out to the front so she could demonstrate another technique called Push Hands. This involved the gentle interlocking of his wrists with hers and both he and she moving their hands in a slow cyclical action, as if trying to ward each other off, each trying to feel the other's intentions, and moving gently to counter them. Then, elbows came into it and it was as if he was dancing with her, hands pushing, elbows rolling, bodies swaying. The feeling was exquisite, like he was exploring her energy and her balance, and laying his own bare to her, but he was unused to being centre stage and it made him sweat nervously.

Doc Lin smiled encouragingly, and told him to close his eyes. The motion continued and the feeling was mesmerising. It was like playing, he thought. Pointless, Sally would have called it, but it was magical, and also intimate, in a unique way. Body language revealed much about the lay of a person's thoughts, a person's feelings. Push Hands, Phil reckoned was like plugging directly into a person's mind, and allowing them to plug into yours.

The students were embarrassed, praying Doc Lin wouldn't expect them to pair off and try it. That wasn't what they expected from a Tai Chi class at all. Phil was vaguely aware of their shuffling and the clearing of throats but beyond that, he was lost in a maze of swirling energy, his mind transposed to a point located somewhere in the light pressure between his and Doc Lin’s wrists.

She stopped suddenly and turning to everyone, she smiled. "Now, find someone you like the look of," she joked. "And practice."

They were an even number which meant Phil had to rejoin the group to pair someone else off. He'd had it in mind that he'd be comfortable with Lara, or for some peculiar reason with the hairy bear man, but the two of them had already paired off together. Phil was at a loss, turning this way and that only to find that the others had already made their choices. He felt a moment of abandonment, like a child at school that no one wanted to play with, but then a pair of

wrists were suddenly thrust at him.

"I'm Penny," said Caroline. "Penny Barnes."

Oh shit, thought Phil. "Hi Penny. I'm Phil."

She smiled. "Hi Phil."

Damn that smile! He'd been happy to imagine her as frosty and sour and standoffish with her scowls, but the smile suggested her tight expression was simply nerves that, underneath, she might actually be friendly. Was there such a thing as a friendly Caroline, he wondered? Oh Lord... perhaps this was a new approach.

Phil and Penny closed their eyes and made tentative contact. Then they began to move their hands as Doc Lin had shown them, circling back and forth, their wrists only just touching, the pair of them feeling the warm union of their skin, both their minds focused on it. They were clumsy at first and kept losing contact, but gradually, they got the hang of it, moving this way and that, swapping hands suddenly, trying to move back and forth as gracefully as Doc Lin had shown them – testing each other's balance.

When she leaned into him, he could smell her breath and her skin – sweet and soapy – smell her hair, which she'd gathered into two makeshift pony tails that made her look both cute and carelessly ridiculous. She felt warm, her movements smooth and fluid, while Phil was conscious of a slight tremor in his arm. He hoped she couldn't feel that and think him ancient and doddery – not that it mattered what she thought of course because this was only Caroline after all.

It was magical for a while, but then Phil felt awkward. He'd never touched a woman this way before – I mean just played with her. He wondered if it was altogether proper – wondered if Sally would have approved if she'd seen them together like that – or if she'd have stormed off to her father's house in a fit of jealous pique.

"It's like dancing," said Phil.

"Feels almost as good as sex," chuckled Penny.

Phil opened his eyes in surprise, but hers remained closed. She wasn't flirting – she'd just blurted it out without thinking, and she was right – the feel of it – it had been a kind of lovemaking! Whoever this Caroline was, she was rather cheeky, and Phil liked that.

"Sorry," she said, suddenly fumbling. "I don't know why I said that." She stepped back. "I didn't mean... Oh, how embarrassing!"

"Eh? Don't be daft. It's okay, really. I'd be inclined to agree, except I can't remember that far back."

What? Phil, you dobbin! Now it was his turn to blush.

During the practice, her face had grown relaxed and soft, transforming her into someone else entirely, but now she grew tense again. Phil was amazed by it and wondered if he did the same. It was as if, for a moment he'd been gazing at the face of a woman's

innocence, a girl's face, a face unwearied by life, a face unworn. And then the content of her life had flooded back and disfigured her.

She was aware of him staring at her, but didn't know what it meant, so she frowned and looked down at her feet. Phil didn't know what to say, so he looked at his feet too, and Doc Lin mercifully called time. Then they stood apart from each other, but not quite so far as to risk offending the other. It was odd, thought Phil – the most peculiar thing!

Finally, they followed everyone else in the closing moves, raising their arms slowly, then lowering them, breathing in and out, sinking the energy into their Dan Tien. But judging from the way Penny shot off afterwards, Phil guessed she was anything but calm. Indeed he imagined her cringing with embarrassment, though it was quite unnecessary, and he wished she could see that. He wasn't some sober, scowling, stiff-ass. Though he did wish he'd not blurted out that hasty reply suggesting he'd not had sex in decades. He just liked a bit of fun! But it seemed fun was so rare these days it drew him up sharp.

The thing that really troubled him in all of this was he'd gone to a lot of trouble convincing himself she was just another Caroline, yet out of sixteen people in the hall that morning, she'd chosen him to do Push Hands with, which meant she couldn't be a Caroline at all, could she? He might have tried for weeks to stand next to her, just on the off chance of them sparring together, but the week it came to doing Push Hands, Caroline would have been away, or she would have turned quickly to the Hairy Bear Man, or to Lara Walters instead, or indeed anybody except him.

Phil made a point of letting her go, and lingered instead for tea. He poured out a cup for Lara, then offered to pour one for the Hairy Bear Man, and was surprised when the normally reticent, giant of a man gave a nod. "Thank you, Philip." he said. "That's very kind of you."

"I quite enjoyed that," said Lara, as the three of them sat down together.

Phil smiled. It seemed he was still capable of making friends. Lara enjoyed the tea and chat as much as the practice and he guessed it was her nature to take pleasure out of anything life offered. She wore a wedding ring and he wondered what sort of wife a woman like this would have made – a smile and a twinkle and a comforting hand. But Sally had been that way once, hadn't she? It was just that life had darkened her – life with him, he thought, sadly. But he was no wife-beater! He treated Sally with the same decency and respect he treated anyone – never raising his voice, never pestering her in bed when she was clearly tired and unresponsive. What more could a man do, for pity's sake?

"Do you manage to practice much, Philip?" asked Lara.

He sighed. "Well, I've tried, but my family seem to find it all very embarrassing. The children are only having a bit of fun, I suppose, but it's hard to get into the feel of it when they're dancing around and pulling faces at you, or pretending to ride their bikes straight at you and pulling away at the last minute."

Lara's twinkle faded for a moment before sparkling up again. "But what about your wife, dear?"

Phil smiled, he'd not meant to sound morose. "Sally's being a bit weird about it to be honest. I'm sure she thinks I'm turning into a new age flake, waving my arms up and down in the garden. I've tried explaining it's about circulation and synchronised breathing rather than appeasing the garden spirits, but she's definitely worried about me."

But was she worried, thought Phil, or merely repulsed?

The Hairy Bear Man tipped his head back, parted his lips and let out a single, sharp laugh, before resuming his silent vigil beside them.

Lara smiled. "Well, I suppose my husband would have thought the same about me, if he was still alive. Though he humoured me in many other pastimes without batting an eye. There was Yoga, Aromatherapy, and so many other things, so I suppose if anyone's a new age flake, it's me. I live on my own now. My house came with an orchard which I've never really had much pleasure from until recently. I've found it's a nice, private place to practice."

"Ah..." Phil tried to picture it. It sounded marvellous. "You're very lucky, Lara."

"I suppose I am. But really, you can come and practice there any time. Any of you. It's separate from the house and walled in – you can just let yourself in through the back gate – come and go as you please."

"That's very kind, Lara, but really..."

"No, no, you must come. There's an old Summer House. I can put some tea and things in there, and anyone can come to practice – oh please say you will. It'll be lovely!"

"A Summer House, you say?"

Phil had to admit it sounded idyllic, but he'd never get the time. He was already pushing his luck with an hour for acupuncture and another hour on Sunday mornings for Tai Chi. If he started taking himself off whenever he fancied a bit of practice, that would really sour Sally's mood. It was just a pity it wasn't something they could do together. But whatever Phil took an interest in, Sally would always take up the role of sneering critic, as if waiting for him to get bored with it and then accuse him of wasting his time, and their money.

But it wasn't like she was a golf widow or a fishing widow. Other married blokes he knew seemed never to be at home, as if they

couldn't bear it and had to bury themselves in an absorbing hobby or conveniently long business trips. Perhaps that was it! He spent too much time at home and in spite of Sally's occasional sulks at him for ignoring her, he was actually under her feet too much.

Lara had retrieved a post-it pad from her handbag, and was jotting down a set of numbers: 1965, "The year of my marriage," she explained. It was also the combination of the lock on the gate to the orchard and she handed it to Phil, then immediately wrote another and handed it to the Hairy Bear Man.

She was very trusting, thought Phil, perhaps too trusting and possibly a little potty. "Thank you very much," he said.

"But you will come? And pass the word to the others."

"I will."

Driving home, he had no intentions of keeping his promise. It was all getting too complicated and he was in enough trouble with Sally as it was. But on the other hand, he could feel his arms wanting to go into the Silk Reeling movements, as if they'd suddenly become possessed and craved the sensation. He didn't know what he was getting into, wasn't sure if he was doing any of the things Doc Lin had shown him correctly. She'd talked about an internal feeling, about imagining the movement of energy, of driving it about with a combination of the mind and the breath. Phil guessed that was key to the whole thing really, but it was impossible to get near it at home when Marty was doing monkey impressions in front of him.

You're taking yourself too seriously Dad, he was saying. And boys who took themselves too seriously, at school for example, got cut down to size by brain-dead bully-boys. One must never take one's self too seriously, was the motto. One must also dress and act the way that is dictated by unspoken convention. No hat, and no ear-defenders, lest the neighbours laugh at you. And God forbid they should ever catch you in the garden waving your arms about!

Phil understood Marty's concerns that his father was becoming ever more uncool by the minute and that the absolute worst thing for a lad on the cusp of his teenage years was to have his peers consider his father a nutter. Marty was being protective of him. But Phil rejected it. He was not ready for his pipe and slippers yet, not ready for cosy stereotypical obscurity, while the young generation got on and trashed the world. He wasn't done living in it yet, hadn't even begun to live, he thought. Then he wondered if Richie had any old waistcoats he'd grown tired of.

He'd spent the first ten years of his adulthood finding a wife, the second bringing up children. He wasn't about to spend the next two, or hopefully three decades fading politely away. Indeed, he'd had enough of being polite. It was about time he started speaking his

mind. He caught himself, and decided he must ask Doc Lin exactly what these herbs were that she was giving him. His ear was still ringing most of the time, but apart from that he was beginning to feel indestructible!

CHAPTER 9

Sally had withdrawn the easy intimacy of her body years ago. Phil couldn't remember exactly when it had happened. It had begun some time after Elspeth had been born, he supposed: a long and difficult labour ending in an emergency caesarean, a nasty scar and a body that had refused to snap back to its earlier svelte self. He had accepted the change in her shape as one accepted the necessity of changing ones motor car. It didn't mean you liked the old one more or less than the new one – things just moved on. And there was nothing wrong with Sally's new-found roundness. Her thighs were softer, her breasts larger – the feel of her against him altogether more substantial... and she was still Sally.

The problem was that Sally hated herself, hated what she saw as the loss of her youthful figure, her transformation into someone much fatter. Fat was the word: fat and cellulite, and wrinkles. These were the things that got circled in the glossy magazines and poked fun at. Look at so-and-so, former child beauty queen, now a fat, ancient slag with cellulite! And then there was the impossible balancing act the modern woman was expected to perform – the perfect mother, the confident, professional working woman, and the imaginative lover.

So far as Phil could see, it came down to money. They lived in a detached house in a middle class suburb of Middleton – open plan front gardens and textured brick individuality. Their combined income was lower-middle class, but if Sally were to say stuff it and become a full time mother, they'd be relegated to a working class income, and a flimsy semi or a manky terraced, with wall-to-wall neighbours, roaming packs of feral teens, and not a hope in hell of an en-suite bathroom.

Somewhere in all of that, in the nonsense of their lives, they had forgotten they'd once seen the purpose of their lives in simply being together. Now they had what they wanted, but didn't seem to care for it very much, while at the same time were apparently reluctant to let any of it go. And in the process they had forgotten how to be with one another. Sally was no longer his wife, but sometimes his nagging mother, sometimes his companionable sister and occasional staunch ally against the combined psychological warfare perpetrated by their offspring. And what troubled Phil was how she seemed to have accepted the loss of her self, the loss of her desire for life and for him. And Phil wanted a lover – wanted Sally to be that lover. It was just that she seemed happier being his mother... or his sister.

Sally: "What time are you coming to bed?"

Phil: "I'll come now if we can have sex."

Sally: "I'm tired. I just want to sleep."

Phil: "But I'm desperate Sal!"

Sally: "And I'm desperately tired. Are you coming or what?"

"No, I'll stay down here, find some porn on the Internet and have a wank instead."

"All right, you do that."

They never said these things of course, except subliminally. He reckoned Sally understood how things lay in that department, and though she might not exactly approve of him masturbating, the alternative for her was far less attractive. But Internet pornography is a desperately poor substitute for a loving relationship and, except for the occasional visit to the seedier side of the web, Phil quickly grew bored and neglected this part of himself until an acupuncture session with Doc Lin grew dangerously out of hand, and he ejaculated copiously all over her lovely clean white coat.

All right – she was massaging his penis at the time, and it was only a dream but, as he changed his pyjamas in the small hours, he was shaken by the experience. He'd not had a wet dream since puberty. My God! What was he going to do? Take a mistress? No... too demanding and ridiculously unlikely at his time of life. Employ a prostitute then? No... too dangerous and expensive! And he wouldn't know where to ask. Get divorced then and find another woman? Don't be absurd: he loved Sally, and he loved his children! No, he wanted to fix this relationship, not start a fresh one!

What then? What the hell was a man supposed to do? Tie a knot in it?

"Sexual relations all right, Mr Markham?"

Phil had just put away his tongue and was trying not to think of the dream as Doc Lin checked his pulse, her fingers lightly pressed against both his wrists. He could feel himself swaying under the beat of his heart and he was sure she could tell something was wrong.

"I'm sorry, Doctor Lin. I lied to you before. My sex life is a mess – well, non existent to be honest."

"Ah... I'm sorry to hear that Mr Markham, but at least now I know ringing ear is not caused by sexual excess."

"Excess?" He laughed "No, no... I doubt that very much."

"Your wife has emotional problem?"

"No more than anyone else. She expects too much of herself and the world probably expects too much of her as well."

"And what do you expect?"

"Me? Oh, it seems unfair of me to expect anything. The last thing she wants is me nagging her as well as the kids and her father."

"Father?"

"Yes. I don't think he's ever been happy with anything she's done.

Wanted her to be a doctor, but she wasn't up to it – became a librarian instead. Wanted her to marry the son of a property tycoon – even had one lined up and everything, but he was arrested for fraud, so she married me instead, possibly on the rebound. She seems to spend all her life trying to make it up to him, as if he cared. It makes no difference what she does, you see? It'll never be enough. How can anyone be so self centred they think the world and everyone in it has to dance to their tune?"

He sighed. Doctor Lin had gone into silent mode, her eyes soft and sympathetic, listening, though he knew by now she'd not understood half of what he'd said. She surmised that he'd finished, got it off his chest, then patted his arm. "Acupuncture is good for you. This is my understanding."

"Yes, yes. It seems to be doing... well, something. Tell me... is there something you can prescribe to... well... take away the, em, fire?"

"Everything we do is helping to cool the fire, Mr Markham. Herbs, acupuncture, massage. You do not sweat so much now... have you noticed? Balance improving, also. Yes? Calmer too."

"Yes, yes – all of that. But actually... I meant the fire... down there."

"Down there? You mean sexual organ? Take away, desire? No, no, Mr Markham. Fire down there is natural. We don't want to complicate things."

But how much more complicated could they be?

CHAPTER 10

Penny wasn't at the next Tai Chi class and Phil took heart from that, telling himself this meant she was a Caroline after all. He felt a moment of regret she was not there, which confirmed his suspicions and gave strength to his efforts at dismissing her as an insignificant projection of his own increasingly desperate imagination. As for the Tai Chi, he'd been practising, sometimes in the garden when everyone else was in bed, which meant it was going dark and his neck was covered in midge-bites. But he'd begun to feel something in his hands now, a warm tingling when he was doing the exercises, the Silk Reeling and some of the Qigong movements Doc Lin had introduced them to. He'd looked them up on the Internet, bought a DVD – all in spite of the continuing derision of his family.

After class that day, he pointed his car out of Middleton and headed up over the moors, parked in a lay-by that had been familiar to him in his youth, tied on his boots, shouldered a pack and set off across the muddy wilderness. It was a bad day, cool and drizzling. He knew this corner of the Pennines though, and even when the mist came down thick and clingy, he was able to find his way without much trouble across a sodden plain of heather and sphagnum moss to the cross-shelter on Black Hill. It was a popular climb, but on a day like this he was assured of his solitude, except when he came around out of the wind, he found a booted, mud-splattered, Lycra-clad Penny Barnes sipping tea with an expression he could only describe as thoughtful.

She turned, mystified by the intrusion, then twitched and almost spilled her tea: "Shit! Phil?"

Phil was astonished: she remembered his name?

"Penny? You... walk?"

"Yes... what do mean ‘walk?’ Anything wrong in that?"

"No... no... it's just that I don't know many women who walk, that's all... in fact I don't know any."

"Well, now you do. Except I don't walk very often these days."

He sat beside her and shook the rain from his hat. "Me neither. Time seems to be the problem."

Gloomily she concurred. "Tell me about it."

He noticed her ring, though he was certain she'd not been wearing one at the class. One always looked for the ring, he thought. "You're married?"

She noticed him eyeing up her finger. "Hmm? Oh, yes. Sometimes I take the ring off to see what it feels like to be me again."

"Ah... does that work?"

She smiled. "Not for very long."

This was impossible, he thought! He'd been visiting the top of Black Hill all his life and this was the first time he'd ever met someone he knew up here – and after all these years, that someone just happened to be Penny Barnes, the woman he desperately needed to be Caroline, so he could dismiss her, but who would not oblige. No. It seemed this woman was definitely *not* a Caroline after all.

"You have children, Penny?"

"Two boys – fourteen and sixteen."

"Ouch!"

"Exactly. You?"

"Daughter's eight, my son's nearly thirteen."

"Let me guess: she's still cute and you don't want her to grow up. And he's just embarrassed by you all the time?"

"Close enough."

"Tea?"

"Please."

She took a sip, then handed him the cup. It was like he'd known her all his life, was as intimate with her as Sally, so he did not even pause to consider before drinking after her from the same cup. She was married! Well, that put a different spin on things for sure! Did it make it any more safe, he wondered? Was her husband a good man? Were they happy, or were they sleepwalking like him and Sal? Did she still make love to him? Or was she tired all the time, leaving him to fend for himself any way he could, like Phil?

"Did you go to Tai Chi this morning?" she asked.

"Yes. I came up here afterwards. I... I wasn't ready to go home straight away. I noticed you were missing."

"No you didn't. You never notice when I'm missing."

"What?"

"Never mind. To be honest I was embarrassed, about what I'd said to you last week. That's why I didn't come."

"I wondered about that. But there's no need. Look, I've said worse things. I'm always putting my foot in my mouth. And it was... funny."

She smiled, but said nothing.

"Will you go next week, do you think?" he went on.

"I'd like to, but it seems pointless. I feel self conscious whenever I try to practice at home. The boys think I'm... I don't know what. They're being pretty stupid about it, and David, my husband, well he's very churchy, you know and he thinks I'm going to become a Buddhist, though he probably means Taoist, except he tends to lose his way outside the very narrow, fundamentalist faction of the church he grew up in."

"I'd not thought of the spiritual angle. Sally thinks it's more hippy-

dippy."

Penny laughed. "Hippy-dippy would suit me," she said. "David's got me down for a rescue chat with the vicar."

"Eh?"

She grinned, almost losing control over her angular features and settling into that girlish softness. Phil watched, mesmerised, willing her into letting go, into relaxing.

"Ridiculous isn't it?" she said. "So... you too then?"

"Yes, me too. Though I'm sure it's more that they're afraid I'm losing my mind than courting Buddhahood. Or maybe just that they don't want me to become embarrassing to them."

Her face fascinated him, the effort she seemed to put into keeping it fastened down like that, like a shop shutter on early closing, all graffiti sprayed and depressed. He wanted to make her laugh, catch her unawares so she'd forget herself and let go, let the shutter up then he could see her sunny side again – the sunny side that had made her laugh and liken Push Hands to sex in the company of a complete stranger.

"It's odd," he went on. "I seem to have spent my whole life being ignored by everyone. Then I decide to take an interest in something, and suddenly everyone seems to disapprove. Would they prefer me bland, do you think?"

"Less obtrusive perhaps," observed Penny. "I was doing nothing but watching soaps and eating crisps. Everyone seemed happy with me that way, but when I realised I knew all the cast lists by their proper names, I decided I'd better do something about brightening my life up. And yes, I think they would prefer me to be less obtrusive."

"Hmm, still. A rescue chat with the vicar sounds a bit much. I mean it's only a bit of exercise for pity's sake."

"Is it? Is that all it means to you?"

Phil looked aside, stared out into the formless mist, and felt the wind cooling him. "No. It's become more than that. I felt it when I was doing the Push Hands with Doc Lin. And then later when we... when you and I..."

"I know. What happened there, Phil?"

"I've no idea. What you said, about making love... I know you were only joking but even so – and I'm not religious, never even thought of myself as spiritual, but if two spirits ever came together and found themselves without the physical means of doing it, then... I think that's how they'd do it."

It was a very intimate thing to have said, he thought, and he regretted it, because he did not want her to think ill of him, did not want her to think he was a sleaze or that he was flirting. On the contrary though, for a moment at least, she seemed to warm to him

and she brightened a little, allowing the shutters up for a second. "That must be because you have a dirty mind," she said with a little twinkle.

He laughed, but then she really caught him off guard: "My life is crap," she said.

He thought about that, took another sip of tea, then admitted his life was crap too. "But, I'm not looking for an affair," he said, though it puzzled him why he should have mentioned this to Penny.

"Me neither," she replied.

It seemed for a moment they had looked at one another and known everything there was to know –an intuitive leap that had saved decades of misunderstanding. Here I am Phil, vulnerable to an encounter with the right man, and there you are, vulnerable to an encounter with the right woman. You might be the man for me, as I might be your woman, but let's not bother finding out, because we both know how stupid that would be.

"I mean... I've never even thought about it," he went on.

"Well, me neither."

"Barely have the time."

"I know. And it's not like we haven't got enough problems as it is, eh? So, we'll go back to our crap lives and try to fix them up as best we can, see our way through with honour and dignity."

"Honour and dignity? Good words, those. They ought to mean something, even these days."

She laughed. "Well... we're a right pair of – what do they call them – those people you meet for the first time and within seconds they're telling you about their hernia operation?"

"Ah... early revealers? Yes... you need to avoid them. They're a pain in the arse for sure!"

She looked at him warmly. She liked his gentle sense of humour, liked that look of sympathetic understanding. Oh, there was such a lot she could have revealed to him!

"Where are you parked?" she asked.

"The lay-by on Moor Road. You?"

"Winnat's Fold."

Phil normally swung his route round to include the little hamlet of Winnat's Fold, which meant he and Penny would most likely be walking back that way together, except he decided it was safer for him just to go back the way he'd come. He couldn't risk being in this woman's company any longer, or next thing he'd be asking her to share a coffee with him somewhere, offering her his mobile number should she ever want to "talk" to someone. And what she'd said about honour and dignity had really struck a chord in him. It had made him wonder if they were kindred spirits, and that was a really dangerous

and stupid thing for him to be thinking!

It’s true – he'd never seriously considered having an affair, that is until now, that moment in the mist with Penny Barnes. He'd never understood why apparently sane men with long marriages could suddenly throw it all away on a reckless liaison – I mean, if only they'd stopped to think! But Phil could understand it now. It was easy to deny that you needed something when you never came across it. But when you did, he saw how easy it would be to ruin yourself, even for a kiss.

"Ah well," he said. "Thanks for the tea. And the chat. I'll head back to the car now." He forced a laugh. "Sally will be thinking I'm not coming home."

"Does Sally worry?"

"No... but she might start changing the locks."

She laughed. "You poor old married man."

"And you poor old married woman."

He stood and began to shoulder his pack, reluctant to part and on the verge of saying he'd walk back to Winnat's Fold with her. *Don’t be stupid Phil. Let her go. Honour and dignity, remember? Knowing this woman cannot take you anywhere but down.*

"I hope the chat with the vicar goes all right," he said. "My advice is to get a Buddha garden ornament, but then I'm in a provocative frame of mind these days. They've got some really nice ones in McCannels at the moment – not the jokey, jolly kind, but really serene looking, you know? Honour and dignity sometimes requires that we do not go down without a fight, Penny."

"You know, I think that's a good idea," she chuckled. "If you hang on a minute, Phil, I'll walk with you. I usually swing by Moor Road anyway."

"Em... okay."

He turned away as she bent over to fix up her rucksack but it was too late to avoid the image of her peachy bottom. It was stupendous, he thought and at once, he pictured her on top of him, pounding up and down, and then him ramming her from behind, those fleshy buttocks slap slap slapping into his pubic bone.

Oh,... Stop it, Phil! For pity's sake! You're driving yourself insane!

Who was she? Why was she tormenting him like this? At least with a Caroline you'd no trouble avoiding her. With this woman even the most impossibly contrived meeting could apparently fall into place of its own accord!

She was a powerful walker, powerful legs – not a big woman, but she had a robustness and a tremendous energy, he thought, and as he fell in beside her he realised their natural pace was well matched. Like during the "Push Hands", they seemed to "fit" together, but he felt

awkward now – conversation came so easily with her, he feared he was in danger of being too intimate, of saying something he really shouldn't, of saying things he should only think of saying to Sally – except there were some things he could not say to Sally for fear of disturbing the illusion of their lives.

It was not that it was a bad illusion or that they had no substance without it, it was just the way they had come to see each other, and it was easier to go on with the illusion than to risk seeing each other as they really were, in case they found they no longer liked one another... and the worst fear was that they were only holding together for the sake of the children. So yes, it was easier with Penny, because there was nothing between them: no illusion, no tried and tested way of being.

The silence grated on him though and eventually he told Penny about Lara's orchard, told her the combination of the gate. "I mean, she said we were all welcome... the whole class."

"That's lovely. Have you been yet?"

"No. As usual, it's finding the time."

"I'll probably not be able to make it either, but it sounds perfect... private. And you're sure she doesn't mind?"

"On the contrary. In fact, I think she'd appreciate the company. Her husband passed away recently."

"You seem to get on well with her."

"She's lovely."

By the time they reached Phil's car, the mist was much thicker, and there was a cold rain. He was fairly dry in his hooded jacket, but Penny was wearing only a thin fleece over her Lycra shorts and top. She was getting soaked. He'd offer her a ride back, he thought, except she'd only refuse – I mean did he think she was going to dissolve or something, and what was the point of going for a walk if you were going to accept a lift the first chance you got?

"Could I beg a lift," she asked. "I'm getting a bit wet. Would you mind?"

"Em... of course not, Penny."

Inside, the windows misted at once and Phil realised he'd never been in a car alone with another woman before – not since marrying Sally anyway. Before then it would have been the girls he'd come up here with of a dark night, snogging and groping, and then losing his virginity to Katie that time. They could see nothing of the outside world and the feeling was one of isolation, of cosiness, a feeling that no one knew where they were, that they were together... and they might do anything and no one would know.

The car was untidy – bits of packaging on the back seat from one of Elspeth's new toys, and a half-eaten Kit-Kat squished into the

upholstery where Marty had apparently been sitting on it. Phil sighed. What had happened to him? He'd always been so fussy about his car, always cleaning it. Now he couldn't be bothered, as if the weight of his life bearing down on him was getting too much. And when he had a few precious minutes to himself the last thing he wanted to do was waste them mucking the car out. Still, what must Penny be thinking? A slobby car for a slobby man? He could be tidy, he could be smart... he longed for tidiness and smartness, a smart, tidy life... maybe just him and Penny Barnes?

What?

He drove a little too quickly along the single track road. He was in a hurry to deliver her now, struggling against all sort of stupid ideas, but they arrived by the pretty little village green in one piece and Penny thanked him. She was sweet, he thought. No. Not sweet. She was a powerful, impressive woman, with a stunning bottom and when he allowed himself to think about it, she made him ache with base desire he'd all but forgotten. On the one hand it was reassuring he was still capable of such an intense feeling, but also deeply troubling, because there was nothing he could do about it, beyond fixing it with a cold shower.

"You're welcome Penny," he said. "See you at Tai Chi perhaps?"

"Perhaps. See you, Phil."

I doubt it, he thought, then he drove away shaking, telling himself it would be all right, that he just had to see Sally and the kids, remind himself of who he was. But is that really who he was? Or was he the man quaking with suppressed desire? The man that Penny Barnes had reminded him still existed?

CHAPTER 11

"Fucking Hell... no!"

"Dad!"

Sally chided her father, though she was barely able to conceal her own mirth at the footage Marty had shot, using the digital camera she and Phil had bought him for his birthday.

Phil came in weary from work, to find them all in the lounge, gathered around the TV set, where the star attraction appeared to be him, struggling through the first five movements of the Chen Style Eleven Form. He had to admit he looked like a complete loon, but then he'd not intended his practice for an audience. Marty had obviously been in the bushes, and Phil, so self absorbed and serious, hadn't noticed him. More footage was to come, this time of him apparently in a semi-trance, moving his arms about like a windmill in slow motion, Silk Reeling.

They'd not seen him come in, and he stood quietly at the back of the room, observing them, his ego being levered up and given a severe slapping by their amusement until it was good and angry. Then came a surreptitious shot of the top of Phil's head where he was developing a considerable bald spot – which was another thing that kept being brought up. He wasn't bothered about the bald spot – he was middle aged for pity's sake, what did they expect? It was like, I don't know, he thought: they wanted – no, they *expected* – him to be vain about it and seemed intent on needling him until he conformed to their wishes.

Trevor had a full head of hair, though he was in his seventies now and he seemed very proud of it, to the extent that he used inappropriately large quantities of Grey-Away on it. It had a darkness and a lustre that made him look ridiculous, though Phil would never have pointed that out to him, no matter how provoked – because it simply wasn't polite. Honour and dignity, he thought – these were his new buzzwords.

"Bollocks," said Trevor, as the footage once more showed Phil doing the Qigong Shibashi closing form, which had his arms and legs bobbing up and down like a tin-soldier marching on the spot. Marty had quite a portfolio, and the lad certainly seemed to have got the hang of his camera. Then: "Oh, hello Phil. Just admiring your martial arts. Must say it's a bit more Marcel Marceau than Jackie Chan."

"Effective though," said Phil. "It seems I've only to assume the position and everyone falls over laughing." He would not let them see he was angry. Was that cowardice? Was it pride? Was it Ego? Damn it... no he would not let them see his anger.

"Brought your hedge clippers back," said Trevor with a cheeriness

Phil was sure was designed to irritate him. "Also got a scheme you should look at. New kind of fund. Two fifty a month for five years, guaranteed to pay at least ten percent... I'll talk you through it shall I?"

Phil had been pacifying customers all day – customers who weren't going to get their parts delivered on time, unable to tell them it was because his machines were knackered and no one would give him the money to get them repaired or replaced. He wanted a bath and a drink and an hour's private Silk Reeling – not an hour's financial doublespeak.

"Em..."

"I think it's a good idea Phil," said Sally. "We don't save enough."

She was right. They didn't save enough, and what they managed to put away seemed to go just as quickly whenever one of the cars wore out and had to be replaced. But Phil never understood Trevor's schemes and couldn't bear to be lectured through them like one of Trevor's former customers from the bank. And what he couldn't understand, he was reluctant to trust.

"Some other time, Trevor. It's been a tough day."

"You really should make your money work for you, you know? And this mortgage business..."

Sally gave her father an urgent poke. She'd talked to Trevor about the mortgage? She'd promised Phil she wouldn't. He closed his eyes. He was definitely angry now. Okay, so their endowment wasn't going to pay off, but it was wide-boys like Trevor who'd sold them the thing in the first place, and he was damned if he was going to let them sell him another dud to get them out of it.

"The mortgage is fine. We've sorted it."

"But Dad says..."

Dad says they could save a few pence by doing it some other way that's infinitely more complicated and involves the dubious brokership of some spotty faced financial shyster that he happens to drink with at the golf club. And Sally had promised not to discuss it! It was private!

"Sorry... you'll have to excuse me. I've had a terrible headache all day. I need to lie down for a bit."

"But I'm putting the tea out."

"I'll get something later."

"I'll throw yours away then shall I?"

"No need," said Trevor, "I'll have Phil's if he's not hungry. Save me making something. You don't mind do you Phil?"

Mind? Of course I bloody mind, you pompous arsehole! "Be my guest, Trevor. Sorry I'm not much company this evening."

"Not at all. Not at all. You have a lie down, old boy."

Phil lay on the bed, curtains closed, feeling the bed shake beneath

him. It was his heartbeat, rocking it, making it squeak. The pressure was in his temples too, pulsating and thumping, the sweat pouring from his brow, his shirt soaked, his ear filled with a thousand chirping crickets.

He tried to calm himself with the fantasy of being alone on an island, living in a little summer house, a cosy bunk to sleep in, and a simple gas stove for cooking, a little plot of land to work. Then Penny had come to him one night, desperate for shelter, David having kicked her out, and she was wet through, banging on his door. What else could he do? He let her in, gave her dry clothes, a hot drink... told her she could stay as long as she wanted, which of course meant for ever.

David was a devil of a man of course, a man who did not appreciate Penny, and Phil disliked him as much as he told himself he disliked Trevor. He turned a blind eye to David's good side, the side Penny had married and raised kids with. As for Trevor, just as Phil was getting round to hating him completely, he was reminded of the time when Linda had left him, run off to France five years ago, where she was now living with a 30 year old waiter called Anton. Trevor had been shattered, his life in ruins, forty years of marriage dismissed in one moment of inexplicable madness.

My God Trevor!

Ungrateful bloody woman.... who does she think she is? She's sixty for Christ's sake! Phil had been fond of Linda – he still was – and he couldn't help admiring her as well. At some point Trevor had decided Linda was an old woman and should start behaving and dressing like one, to the extent that he'd sold her sporty little MX5 and bought her something more sensible, also began jokingly referring to her as her "mutton dressed as lamb" if she dared to wear anything other than a twin-set and pearls.

It was obvious he'd had it coming.

Then Trevor had found a soul-mate in Emmeline Parker, a clean and tidy woman who'd picked his ego up out of the mud, polished it, as was her way, and put it back on the mantlepiece. The secret of Emmeline was that she was a chameleon-like character, with the intuition to guess when it was twin-set and pearls that Trevor wanted, and when it was the red satin Basque with the crotchlessg panties and fishnets; which days he required her to be a sophisticated dame, and which a filthy harlot. And why would Emmeline want to subject herself to such indignities? Well, the fact that Trevor lived in a five-bedroom house set in an acre of landscaped gardens, and drove a Jaguar might have had something to do with it.

But returning to Trevor, it was hard to completely dislike someone, when you'd seen them thrown upon the rocks, even if they spent every waking moment of their lives trying manipulate those who remained

close to them into doing stuff their way. Indeed, Phil almost resented Trevor for not letting him dislike him unconditionally.

But then such was life.

CHAPTER 12

Middleton was a big town. Phil had lived there all his life, gone to school there, got married there. He was thinking about his school days now as he pushed the trolley round Freshways supermarket. This was his job every Thursday night, ticking off items one by one from the list Sally had prepared for him. There'd been two hundred kids in his year, he recalled, yet he rarely saw any of them now. It was the statistics of it, you see? About a hundred thousand people lived in and around Middleton Borough, so unless you deliberately kept in touch with your old mates, it was unlikely that you'd be falling over them on every street corner.

Phil was thinking about this when he dumped the first item from his trolley onto the checkout conveyor, wondering what perverse trick it was that bent the laws of probability and had you drawn to certain people, while keeping you from others. The checkout girl hadn't recognised him yet and he'd only just recognised her. She'd let her hair down so it fell to her shoulders and partly disguised her features. The uniform, too, had confused him.

"Hi Penny."

"Phil? Is that you?"

"Afraid so – I promise I'm not stalking you."

She was surprised to see him, he thought, appalled possibly, and the way her neck was turning red, he wondered if she might be allergic to him as well.

"Have you worked here long?"

"My first day."

First day? And I end up going to your checkout? Who is this woman?

"How's it been?"

"Okay."

But she seemed uncomfortable, so Phil cut the chat. He hated it anyway, boring, banal chat like that. "How are you? Oh fine?" When what he wanted to say was: "I'm drowning Penny. Help me."

"Do your kids like this cereal?" she asked. "Mine hate it."

"Mine will hate it too this time next week."

Stop it Penny! I need you to be proud and mysterious. Don't talk to me about breakfast cereal, and I don't want to be reminded we've both got kids, that we're middle aged. I want to be young again, starting out again, with you.

"What time do you finish your shift?" he asked.

Her eyes flickered in alarm. What? Did she think he was going to ask her out? He was only making stupid conversation.

"A couple of hours. David's picking me up."

She had! She had thought it! She'd thrown her husband's name in as a foil.

"Sorry... I wasn't coming onto you or anything. Heavens! You've got me blushing now."

She flashed him a smile, then laughed. Such a brief thing, but it told him they were okay again. He really didn't want her thinking he was a sleaze. He checked her fingers. No rings. Why did she do that? Didn't David mind? Or did she slip them back on before he saw her? She'd told him she wasn't looking for an affair, so why do it? Was it that she enjoyed men coming onto her? But that seemed so cheap, and undignified. It didn't seem like the Penny he imagined he knew, or was that just the Penny he wanted her to be, this woman who did not exist, this woman who was not Caroline?

He saw her swiping his items through. Toilet rolls – bleep. Toothpaste – bleep. Ladies' sanitary things – *cringe* – bleep. A bagged set of cheap grey underpants, special offer: £5.99 – *double-cringe* – bleep. It was a good job there were no condoms on there, he thought, or that would have been the end. It was fortunate he'd very little use for them these days.

She folded his receipt and gave it to him. "There's a free petrol voucher too. Are you collecting the School vouchers?"

"Em... yes.. I think. Did you buy yourself that Buddha?"

She gave him an impish smile and nodded.

"Good for you!"

"Do you ever go to Lara's Orchard?" she asked.

Was that an invitation, he wondered? "No... haven't found the time yet... you?"

"No. I will though."

"Really?"

"I think so. I miss the Tai Chi. I think I'll make more of an effort in future. Well... see you, then."

He half nodded, half smiled... an awkward gesture, embarrassed, flustered, then he headed out to the car. It was a pity; he'd been coming to Freshways for years, knew his way around the aisles, but he'd have to go somewhere else now. He couldn't risk bumping into Penny again – couldn't even risk the possibility of seeing her from a distance.

Next morning he was up at six, brushing his teeth with the toothpaste Penny Barnes had touched only yesterday. Oh grow up Phil! Then he was off, searching for Tulketh Lane and the secret orchard of Lara Walters. It was a fine, sunny September morning, dewy and Autumny. The lane ran up out of town, towards the moors, and boasted many fine old houses, all with large plots of land.

The ones nearer the town had been bought up by property

developers, some of them demolished, and a dozen houses now stood on plots that had once been home to just one. A beautifully decrepit Victorian villa called Elsinore was now an uninspiring estate called Badger's Green, and a double fronted art deco villa had become a monstrous block of flats with car-parking. Phil knew this was the modern way, but still there was something wrong about it, something undignified. A house on its own in a decent plot had room to breathe – but these modern builds all squashed together like this... it reminded him of people pressed up too close in an elevator or a rush-hour train, all cringing and in uncomfortable proximity to one another.

Lara's place was on the outskirts, set back nicely, a fine Edwardian house, closed in by mature oak and beech, whose leaves were just beginning to turn. He prayed it would be a long time before this house suffered the same fate, but Lara was getting on in years. How long before the for sale board was going up here as well? Another five years? Maybe ten?

The orchard was accessible from a track that ran parallel to Tulketh Lane and it was here he left the car, then dialled in the combination on the gate and stepped through into paradise. The orchard was huge, like one of those timeless, walled gardens that posh old houses had tucked away. There was a summer house to one side where Lara, good as her word had left tea-bags and cups, and a little gas-stove. The summer house was a beauty, he thought, its wood rotting gracefully, but it had been given a coat of green paint recently and it looked quite cheerful – a couple of wicker chairs out on the deck, bird feeders and a wind chime suspended from the trees. Opportunist shrubs had taken root and were beginning to encroach, but it all looked perfect to him with the early morning sun slanting down through the misty morning. Almost at once, he dropped into the opening position of the Tai Chi form and began to move.

He'd been half dreading, half hoping Penny would be there. He had given her the combination, and there was that fumbled enquiry yesterday that he'd been wondering about, but he was alone, and he found he was relieved.

An hour later, he was logging on to his PC at work as usual, only this morning he felt blessed. He'd a long way to go with Tai Chi, and maybe he was too old anyway to get much out of it beyond relaxation, but he enjoyed it and it was nothing to do with Qi; it was more simply that it had given a little piece of him back to himself, so he could remember who he was outside of his marriage, away from Sally, away from Trevor, and away from the children.

CHAPTER 13

It was a feeling that lasted all day, right up to the fiasco of the keys, when Sally finally let him in and he suddenly felt tired again, the dull, cloying heaviness of the house settling into his bones. But that evening, the house was unusually quiet and Phil sensed at once something was wrong. The heaviness came from Sally. It was in the way she moved, in the way she breathed, the deadness of their marriage having rendered her all but comatose – but the silence? The hollowness?

"Where are the kids?" he asked.

"They're round at Dad's. I've sent them to sleep there."

"Oh? Bit unusual, midweek? Is he taking them to school in the morning?"

"Yes."

Her dead, dull voice had a bit of an edge to it, like old sandpaper, which added to Phil's growing sense of unease. "Is something wrong, Sally?"

"We need to talk," she said.

"What's the matter?"

"Come through and sit down."

This was bad, he thought, and he tried to think of what he'd done or said, or not done or not said. "Look, I know we've not been firing on all cylinders recently," he said. "But we're okay, aren't we?"

"I don't know, are we?"

She seemed cold. She was always cold when she thought it was his fault. If it was her fault, and she knew it, that's when she got emotional, or even angry. They sat down in the lounge. The house felt weird now, unnaturally quiet without the kids, and he almost wished they were around to barge in and interrupt, as was their habit, so cutting off all normal means of adult communication.

"Phil, I know we've not been very... well... intimate for a while, and I know it's probably my fault."

By 'intimate', she meant sex. Sally never used explicit language and always left him guessing as to whether or not he'd got her meaning. "It's not your fault, Sal. I'm sure it's normal for middle aged parents to go through phases like this."

"I'm not sure that it is."

"Deep down we're okay though. I'm sure we are. Nobody knows me like you do Sal."

"I don't think I know you at all. Or maybe I felt I knew you once, but you've changed."

Phil was crestfallen. She'd never spoken like this to him before,

never spelled out how disappointed she was... in him. I mean that was a look of disappointment, wasn't it?

"If this is about the Tai Chi, I think you're all being a bit..."

Sally raised her voice a tone to cut him off. "This is not about the Tai Chi, Phil!"

"Okay... but you're going to have to spell it out to me in words of one syllable."

"I'll do better than that."

She reached down by the side of her armchair and produced a tray upon which was displayed an assortment of sexual paraphernalia. There was the bright purple dildo, the riding crop, gag, illustrated book on various "practices", plus a leather thong – Sally's size. She held all of this at arm's length, pulling a face as if it were a tray of foul smelling poo. Then she set it down on the coffee table and looked at him.

"Is that clear enough for you?"

Phil laughed. "Oh... priceless! She found it! Oh, bless you, Mrs Nosy Parker!"

Sally blushed. Emmeline had indeed found the stuff – come across it "accidentally" when cleaning up, and told Trevor. Trevor had then taken Sally to one side and suggested she investigate Phil's bottom drawer for herself before the children did. Trevor liked a bit of filth as much as the next man, but not when his daughter was concerned.

Sally was puzzled. What was Phil trying to say then? That it was a joke? A trap?

"So you're not... well... using any of this stuff then?"

"What? I don't think that thong's my size Sally. As for that dildo – well, I don't think I could find a use for that – it's designed for women – you see that little thing on the side, well that goes..."

"I don't want to know where it goes! So what are you saying? It was just some kind of a joke!"

"It's no joke, Sal. I'm tired of having my private stuff riffled through. I wanted to scare the pants off Emmeline, make her think we were perhaps enjoying sex a bit more than we ought to at our age – embarrass her, get her to tell Trevor, who would tell you and possibly try to imply I've become some sort of pervert. And it seems to have worked. Hopefully she'll think twice next time for fear of what other depraved stuff she'll find in our private drawers."

Sally twitched, then she laughed. "You idiot," she said.

"I'd love to have seen her face! Odd... to look at her you'd think butter wouldn't melt, but she obviously knew what all that stuff was about."

Sally wasn't sure which was worse: this frank discussion about sex toys, the oblique way her father had indeed tried to imply she was

married to a sex maniac, or the fact that Phil had caught them all out and proved to her what he'd been saying all along – that they did not respect his privacy, that they did not respect *him*.

"How much did all this stuff cost, then?" she asked, recovering her composure.

Phil sighed. Why was she so concerned with the cost of things all the time? "Not much, Sal."

"So I can throw it all away then?"

"Of course. I wasn't thinking of suggesting we actually spiced our love life up with it – I think we need to work a little more on the basics first, before we get involved with that sort of stuff."

She winced. Was he trying to make her feel bad? Wasn't she having a hard enough time as it was without him trying to make her feel guilty as well? Or perhaps he was right.

"Are things that bad?"

"It's normal, Sal."

Sure, normal, he thought: normal for some women not to desire sex, not to want it... normal for them to outgrow it as they got older, just as it was natural for men not to. Natural, like tinnitus, and both of them a pain in the arse for which there was no apparent cure.

"Where did you get it all from?"

"Internet – sex site."

"So it's on our bank statement then: I mean: 'Miss Hotty's Naughty Sex Emporia, or something?"

"I've no idea. I suppose so... though I don't remember what it was called. You'd be better asking Emmeline. If it's on our bank statement, she'll know."

"All right, I think you've made your point."

"I've made it, but it won't alter anything. She'll be back rooting through my drawers next week as normal."

"No. I'll have a word with my dad."

"What's it got to do with your dad? I'm paying her, it's nothing to do with Trevor. And I don't want her coming round again."

"Actually *we're* paying her, Phil. And *I* trust her. All right, she's a bit nosy, but you're too sensitive and I don't want a stranger cleaning up for me. This is my house too."

"She's a stranger to me, Sally. A stranger poking through my private things."

Sally bit her tongue. Phil would hit the roof if he knew Emmeline really was making a point of counting the wine bottles in the recycling bin – that her father would often voice concern at the amount they were drinking, that he'd even calculated the amount Phil was spending on whisky and how much they'd make if they'd invested it instead in a little scheme he'd been thinking about.

"I'll have a word," she repeated.

Phil was losing it now. He couldn't understand why Sally wasn't upset to have someone rooting through her secrets. It was okay, it seemed, so long as nothing was actually stolen. "Our bottom drawers are private, Sal. I married you to raise a family and be private, with you." But that was too philosophical. For Sally there had never been a life away from her father – which puzzled him because as far as he could tell Trevor was barking mad, while her mother, whom Sally hated, was the only one with any sense – sense enough to clear off anyway and live her life the way she wanted to, even if she did run the risk of looking slightly ridiculous.

Sally had not married to leave her father's influence, but rather to draw Phil into it. It was as if she'd always wanted more of a brother than a husband, or did she want him to stand up to Trevor? Phil's head was spinning. He couldn't work all this out now – he was too tired and hungry. She could see he was upset, also that his sympathy for her had outweighed the strength of his argument, that she had defeated him, that Trevor had defeated him, that Mrs Emmeline Parker had defeated him.

She sighed. "The house is quiet isn't it?"

The talking's over, thought Phil. It's done, and he was only too happy to go along with it, to slip back inside that private place where he no longer felt anything at all, and where the only consolation was that nothing hurt either.

"We should get rid of the kids more often," he said.

"Yes... you don't fancy... nipping down to the off licence, do you?"

Sally's mouth always gave a little sideways twitch on the rare occasions when sex was on her mind. It twitched now, and Phil's heart leaped at the prospect. She'd beaten him down – but that was okay: she could pull his fingernails out as well and he wouldn't care, if she was going to be nice to him afterwards. Perhaps the paraphernalia had excited her, but not enough to just do it – she needed to get drunk first. She could no longer do it sober, but, unfortunately, Phil could no longer do it drunk. His heart teetered on the crest of a euphoric wave, then sank without trace. It was his first chance of clawing his way back to Sally in months, and he already knew how it was going to end.

"Couldn't we just... ?..."

"I'd like a *drink*, Phil. White wine, from the chiller cabinet. Make it a couple of bottles, eh? It's been a hell of a day."

When they fell into bed some hours later, there was a kiss, soft, neutral, tentative... then another that raised a sudden head of steam and had them tearing at each other's clothes. At times like this, Phil thought he could happily go insane with passion; the scent of Sally's

arousal blinded him, and the feel of her wetness against his fingers took him back to the earliest of their days together, to a time when they were young, and there were no children, and they could forget about Trevor, because all they needed was each other and the world would bend to their will.

Phil was not so drunk that he did not remember to slip on a condom, though come morning, he could not remember doing it – could not remember anything beyond the feel of her wetness, though the contents of the condom, or lack of contents, as he snapped it off in the morning, was sufficient evidence that nothing much had happened at all.

He would have entered her, he thought, eagerly enough, but after a while he would have become conscious of how long it was taking. The wine would have numbed his sex so it was like doing it through a washing up glove, rather than a Featherlite, and the feeling would have died, and Sally never came that way anyway. Perhaps he'd been able to satisfy her some other way, but she wouldn't remember that either.

He groaned. It might be months before they did it again.

Sally was getting up now and dressing without even looking at him, without leaning over to kiss him. If she'd only done that, and smiled, it would have been all right, but it was as if nothing had happened at all. Had they been teenagers, had it been their first time, and the teat of the condom had been fat and happy in the morning, such a thing would have changed their lives, but a long marriage and familiarity bred a cruel indifference – it did not even matter that the condom was empty – and they would never discuss it.

He was painfully erect now as he pulled back the covers and rose groggily to his feet. He caught his reflection in the mirror. Beside him was a semi-naked woman, with long, beautiful breasts bobbing as she swung them into her bra. But he felt she was all the more distant for her close proximity. She did not even notice his erection. Phil rubbed the sleep from his eyes, then padded across the landing to the bathroom where he waited for things to subside, so to speak, then urinated cautiously. He'd wait until he got to work to move his bowels he thought, because Sally might be wanting to wash her hair.

CHAPTER 14

Penny was flustered. She'd forgotten to put the parsnips in, so she'd held everything else back while the parsnips caught up – the result being that everything was slightly overdone except the parsnips. And cooking for six was always a big deal anyway, especially on your own, when the only assistance she got was from David's mother, Angela, whose idea of help was to say: "Well, I wouldn't have done it that way, dear."

And, being flustered, fluttering in with the gravy, and panicking in case the food went cold on the plates, she'd sat right down and begun to tuck in, forgetting to say grace, in which they thanked God for having provided it all, instead of Penny who'd merely bought it, prepared it, and fucking cooked it. She caught herself with a steaming boiled potato half way to her mouth and Angela looking at her with one disapproving eye, while David rambled on with the grace.

He'd been away for the week, as he was away most weeks now, travelling and selling his company's accounting software. She and the boys didn't say grace when he wasn't at home. It was more of a weekend thing, like church and Sunday school. She wondered if David said grace during the week, at his lunches perhaps, when he wined and dined his prospective clients. No... perhaps not. She looked at him as he rambled on, and on, and on – none of your trite and repetitive graces here, she'd have you know. David would think up special ones each weekend, before turning his mind to ways he could fiddle his expenses.

She wondered when he'd become so pompous. Then she turned to Angela, and thought how much he'd begun to resemble his mother – his frame padding out like an overstuffed Teddy Bear, double chin drooping over his collar, lips moving ever more tightly together as if in permanent disapproval of something.

For which we are eternally grateful! Amen!

He'd notice the plates were cold – it was the first thing he checked, but she'd been in such a panic she'd quite forgotten to warm them. Sure... there... she saw his finger and thumb lightly grip the side of the plate – a surreptitious check – not that he'd say anything to her. But Angela would mention it to him and that would make him quietly cross, not with his mother for being so cheeky, but with Penny for embarrassing him. It could have been worse, she thought: he could have been the violent type, except that would have brought the worst out in her too, and she sensed David was afraid of that. He could shout, but he mostly avoided it, because he knew she could shout louder. If he'd ever raised his hand, she would have gone for the

frying pan.

No, she thought. She was exaggerating as usual. They had a quiet marriage, so long as she did things his way, so long as she went to church every Sunday, so long as she silenced the boys' whining when they had to endure Sunday school, long after an age when other children had disappeared from the scene – and all because they were David's children, and more importantly Angela's grandchildren, and were burdened with maintaining a tradition of piousness and two-facedness. How lovely to see you in Church my dear, now please turn around while I stick this knife between your shoulder-blades!

My God, what was she thinking! Still, the Tai Chi had got her out of going church – even though she'd had to lie about what the old misery Doctor Jackson had said... *Tai Chi - just the thing for you my dear. There's a class on Sunday mornings. It's very important you attend or things will get worse.* When actually, like Phil, she'd sat there in the surgery, bemused, while filling in some sort of quiz, then come away with a prescription for antidepressants.

Angela sighed; obviously the food was not to her liking – well, fair enough, thought Penny; the company was not to her liking.

"And how are your nerves at the moment dear?"

My name is Penny, thought Penny, you miserable old cow. And she looked pointedly at David, who averted his eyes. Had Penny not made a point of telling him never to discuss her personal problems with his mother? *Never, ever again, David. Do you understand me?*

That was after the last outbreak of thrush, which she was sure now she was getting from him. But oh no, David's dick was pure – no filthy germs on him. It must be coming from her unclean folds. Yes... it was Penny's "habits" that were most likely responsible, *like the sanitary things that one inserts, dear?* Angela had a thing about those – she'd mentioned it a few times. Perhaps she disapproved of anything one *inserted*.

So, it was Penny's nerves now.

"Much better thank you, Angela. I find the classes help enormously."

Angela paused to consider this, then shot David a look. Poor David, ducking and diving. He'd promised to sort that one out. Had the Vicar not been yet? There was something very suspicious about anything that clashed with going to church!

Arranging for the vicar to come had definitely been on David's mind, and he really had been about to pick up the 'phone and broach the subject, when Penny had come home with a stone Buddha and plonked him in the border by the little flamingo tree. David wasn't sure he'd seen this correctly and had shot out of the house in disbelief. Then, at sight of the offending idol, he'd picked up a spade as if he

were about to repel boarders. He would have knocked the head off, except Penny managed to shoulder him aside. She was shocked – she'd expected raised eyebrows, but not this. This was madness!

"What do you think you're doing, you idiot?"

David looked at her. He didn't know which was more appalling: that she'd been out and bought a graven image, or that she'd nearly knocked the wind out of him. "No. What do you think *you're* doing?"

"I'm prettying up this corner of the garden, what does it look like?"

"You're not leaving that... that... thing there."

"Why not? What's wrong with it?"

"Well it's hardly.." he looked around and lowered his voice. "It's hardly Christian, is it?"

"Well, no... but the image of the Buddha plays a big part in popular culture David. Have you not noticed? He's well known as a garden ornament. And I've only to look at that serene expression and I feel myself relaxing."

David sighed. He was growing tired of Penny's "nerves". His mother had a cure for nerves and it was simply a matter of stiffening up and pulling oneself together. "What are you talking about? Look, it's not staying there. If you don't move it, I'll..."

"You'll what? Knock its head off? For pity's sake, David! Anyway... he's not mine. I'm looking after him for... for someone."

"What? Who?"

"Just a friend."

"You don't have any friends."

Ooh! Below the belt David.

"Well, not a friend exactly. Someone I know at the class. He's gone away for a bit and wondered if I'd look after it. He was afraid it would get... well... stolen." Penny could feel herself blushing. She was hopeless at lying.

"Doesn't he have a shed to put it in?"

Penny realised David hadn't batted an eye at the mention of her knowing a man, albeit a fictional one. *Yes he's my lover, David. He knows where my vagina is, and he doesn't call it a tuppence either like you do, on the rare occasion when you have need of it.*

"Well... he's a bit odd... and it's only for a few weeks. I'll be passing it on to someone else... We're,... well... sort of sharing it out. A rota. Yes. We have a rota, and it's my turn."

"You'll have to move it on Sunday. I don't want my mother seeing it."

"But it's too heavy to keep moving in and out."

"Well... cover it with a bag or something."

"Oh... very chic."

And so on, and so on. But Buddha kept his head, though for today

he resided under an empty compost sack, lest his serene demeanour caused Angela to have a heart attack.

Frank kept his eyes on the plate. He dreaded these occasions as much as Penny did. She liked Frank. In fact he was probably the reason she'd not dumped David early in their courtship. Frank was a professor of mathematics, and as a young woman with very few O levels to her name, Penny had been fascinated by him. Mathematics had been a blank expression to her, and to meet a professor of it... and one so charming, unlike the screaming berserkers she'd had as maths teachers... well.

He wasn't the only reason of course... I mean David had had his charms in those days and wasn't quite so churchy – or at least he'd pretended not to be – and he'd had his fingers burned with the minister's daughter who'd turned out not to be quite so innocent as she'd appeared to be – and of course Penny had deceived him into thinking she was more innocent than she really was...

"More parsnips, Frank?" She hated how they ignored him. Indeed since his retirement, Frank's only distinction was his impressive invisibility.

"No, he doesn't, dear."

Frank sighed. "Well..."

"Parsnips don't agree with him."

Oh, leave it Angela, let's not get into another discussion about Frank's bowels.

"He was up all night, last time, weren't you, Frank?"

"Was I? I... "

Good boy, Frank. Lie down, go to sleep. Do as I tell you. Be as I say you are. You do not like parsnips Frank. Repeat after me!

The boys had begun poking each other under the table – quick expressions – a raised eyebrow, a puckered lip, each communicating volumes to each other. What did they think? What of all this did they perceive? That their father was a pompous twat and their grandmother a spiky matriarch, chief controller of all their fates? Their mother an unglamorous drudge?

"Really dear, I don't believe in all this oriental nonsense."

Since when had we begun discussing that, Angela?

Keep your distance, you cow. I choose whom I wish to discuss personal matters with. And I would not choose you, even with a gun at my head. I give you an inch and you're organising my diary. Is it not enough I have raised you a pair of future church wardens? Here, take my children... you'll have them from me anyway soon enough – except I think they're wise to you, and so we'll both be losing them pretty soon. They'll run a mile from you and so, by default, from me. But you? You leave me alone. I am my own private self, untouched

and untouchable by all, except those I choose, and I withdraw from you, from all of you.

Shit,.. it's parent's evening tomorrow!

"Well, the only alternative is antidepressants," she said. "And I've tried them. I was on the toilet all morning afterwards. So no thank you. I prefer Tai Chi – it's much healthier."

Number one son, Adam, 16 and already a man of the world, looked up, his brow furrowed in alarm – clearly the concept of his mother sitting on the toilet disturbed him.

But was that a hint of rebelliousness in Penny? What's the matter with you, girl? David was looking scared. He'd spent fifteen years in dread of Penny standing up to his mother. *Because whose side would you choose, David?*

Penny looked at him, saw what he was becoming, what they were both becoming and she hated herself for just standing by and letting it happen, hated him too for letting her stand by. Let's move away David. Let's go to the other end of the country – be ourselves, raise the boys as we choose, live as we choose. You can go to another church, be religious somewhere else, out of the poisonous influence of your mother. I'll stay at home and cook your Sunday lunch and we'll eat it, just the four of us – or bugger cooking it. let's go out, let's ditch this weekly high-table charade and do something else for God's sake!

Ouch: *thou shalt not blaspheme, Penny!*

Gabriel! What would Gabriel be doing now? Had he been to the class this morning? Had he looked for her? Had his heart sunk when he'd not seen her there. Had he gone up on the moors again? Had he tried to find her on top of Black Hill? Except he wasn't Gabriel, was he? You didn't keep falling over Gabriels. He was Phil. And she felt dangerously indiscreet in his presence. Given half a chance she would tell Phil anything, *anything* – even how she was unable to touch her husband's dick now without him squirming in embarrassment, until he even had her thinking it was something unspeakably filthy. You'd let me touch yours, though, wouldn't you Phil? Let me cup your testicles and suck on them, and stroke that hot stiffness, make you dance for more until you cried out and laid your head against my breast, and all that other wickedly exciting stuff I've not done since I got married.

You'd let me do that, wouldn't you Phil?

Keep away from me,... for pity's sake keep away. I've grown too depraved!

Gabriel was not an angel. He was a man, and he loved her, but he couldn't bring himself to say so, and she was too prim and proper to coax it out of him. It just needed the right combination of circumstances, that's all, the right coincidence that would throw them together. And there'd been many Gabriels now – so very many, since

she was a girl and first discovered him longing for his Bathsheba in Thomas Hardy's novel, Far From the Madding Crowd.

Oh yes, Gabriel Oak, was her man, but she was no Bathsheba. She would have loved Gabriel right back, and let him know it. But if her Gabriels had loved her, they'd a funny way of showing it. Indeed, with Gabriels it was as if they didn't even know you were there.

"Such a lot of washing up, dear. You do use the dishwasher, don't you?"

"Hmm...?"

"Dishwasher, dear."

"I'm sorry?..."

Was this to be another lecture on the merits of the dishwasher? Penny felt herself becoming hot. She would have used the dishwasher, of course, until Angela mentioned it – but she wasn't about to use it now, not even if it took her the rest of the day to sort the pots out.

"Much more hygienic, dear."

How would you like me to stick this spoon in your eye, Angela? "Bad for the environment... all that electricity and detergent... to say nothing of the water."

Oh leave it Penny - don't get her going.

"Nonsense. Surely you don't believe all that green propaganda do you?"

"My boys haven't seen more than a few hours snow since they were born, Angela."

Angela looked at once to David, but David was pretending to wipe a spot of gravy off the tablecloth.

Angela sighed. "I don't know why you don't call me mother, dear."

Because you're not my mother. Because my mother's dead, and I've been standing on my own two feet since I was thirteen years old. I was uncaged, Angela dear, until I married your son. Now he controls me, and you control him. You are not my mother, you are my gaoler! You unspeakable, crab-faced old hag!

"Eat up," said Penny. "It's apple crumble and custard for anyone with a clean plate." *And if you ask me if I can manage to make the custard thicker this time, Angela, I swear I will spit in it.*

"Could you manage to make my custard a little thicker this time Penny?"

Penny's eyes narrowed. Are you a real person, Angela, or are you a pantomime villain?

Penny always spat in Angela's custard, or her tea, or anything else she could get away with. It was a filthy habit of course, one she'd learned from the head chef of a restaurant she'd once been a waitress at. It was only to be used as a last resort, with the most difficult and disrespectful customers, of course, and then served with a polite smile.

Was that childish? Would she burn in hell for exposing such an upstanding churchgoer to her saliva?

"And what about you, David?" she asked.

"Hmm?"

"Would you like your custard thick or thin." *Say thin David – and remember this is not just about custard!*

"Oh as thick as you can manage, Penny."

Sigh... no tuppence for you tonight, lover, always supposing you could remember what you do with it. You stick your penis into it, David. You know - that thing between your legs? You do still have a penis don't you? You've not lost it or anything? Only it's rather a long time since I saw you with one.

After lunch, David and Angela slipped like spies unseen into the conservatory. There were important matters to discuss regarding tactics at the next meeting of the church council – such as how to outmanoeuvre Maggy Windbag and slide one of their own cronies in instead. Then they'd have a majority who'd vote on their side and they'd more or less run the church, run rings around the handsome but hopelessly naive young vicar.

It had come as a surprise to Penny to discover that it was not the vicars who ran the churches at all but characters like Angela and David, and the last bastion of spiritual values in an otherwise unfeeling world was no more than another social club – largely at the mercy of its warring cliques.

Frank came into the kitchen, almost on tiptoe to ask Penny if he could help. *Bless you Frank but no. You're such a clutterbuck; the last time you broke my Denby teapot.* "Oh, would you, Frank? That's lovely. Thank you."

Was it her fault if she'd looked at Frank all those years ago and seen David in him... seen David as this thin, slightly frail gentleman with his hesitant mannerisms, and lovely ways? Was it her fault David had chosen instead to turn into his mother?

"How are you, Penny?"

The kitchen was quiet. It was an Angela free zone and Frank could open his mouth now without her finishing his sentences. He could be intelligent and sensitive, be himself again.

"I have good days and bad days, Frank."

"A colleague of mine once had a full blown nervous breakdown," he said, speaking as if in fond reminiscence of the event. "They encouraged him to take up Yoga, which he did, and then he got into running. He said it helped immensely. Died of a heart attack half way through the London Marathon."

Penny wasn't sure of his point. He had a habit of speaking in metaphorical riddles, which antagonised Angela because his intellect

was the one thing she couldn't beat him over the head with, except to imply that he was going senile.

"You mustn't give it up you know," he went on.

"What's that then?"

"Your Tai Chi. I was in China in '82. Cultural visit – saw the people there doing it in the parks of a morning. Terrible places, the cities out east, back then. The squalor was almost Victorian and the humidity's an absolute killer... so it was odd to see so many people looking so serene."

"I didn't know you'd been to China, Frank."

"Long time ago, now." He sighed. "We must always be ourselves, Penny. It's just that sometimes we forget what ourselves are like, because it's easier to let others decide how they want us to be."

"Frank?"

He smiled and she thought there was a dangerous little twinkle in his eye.

David and Angela barely noticed Penny as she slipped through the conservatory and went barefoot across the lawn. Nor did they notice when she whipped the sack off the Buddha and carefully blew the little bits of fluffy compost from him. Frank noticed though and paused half way through his Sudoku to watch as Penny loosened her arms and legs up, shaking like she was having a fit. Then she dropped into the opening position and did the only five moves she knew – did them over and over.

She'd always been a graceful girl, he thought.

Angela's attention was drawn by Penny apparently dancing on the lawn, and then she noticed the garden ornament and stared pop-eyed somewhere between the two. David blushed. Penny hadn't always been so... indiscreet. How did she expect him to love her, to respect her when she insisted on doing something so... embarrassingly stupid.

"Adam, go and ask your mum if she's all right, will you?"

Adam looked at David as if to say: *you must be joking!* He was having enough trouble relating to his mother as it was.

"Go on, now."

Adam shuffled out, and stood a little to one side of Penny who seemed lost in her own world. Eventually, she noticed him. A hug from Adam would have been worth a whole day of Tai Chi, but he was as distant and as wooden as his father these days. "Hi Adam. What's up, chuck?"

Adam cleared his throat, his voice warbling, wavering between high and low, ready to break. "Dad and Grandma want to know if everything's all right."

"No, Adam. You are their instrument."

"Eh?"

"They merely want me to know that they're watching, and do not approve of what they see."

Penny began her moves once more. "Tell them..."

"What? What was that?"

She waited until she'd finished, then smiled. "Just tell them to mind their own fucking business."

Adam's eyes popped open, and he gasped in disbelief.

"Sorry, chuck – only kidding. Just tell them I'm fine."

CHAPTER 15

One of the problems with masturbation was catching the emission at the moment when one was least concerned about the potential of staining the carpet. Phil had found the solution to this problem in a neat little device called a Virgo that simulated a vagina. He'd seen it on the Internet – at the same saucy emporium he'd purchased the jokey stuff from for Mrs Parker's benefit, and in a rare moment of daring, he'd decided to order one. Made mostly of a deliciously soft silicone rubber, it slid over the penis, and was plugged into a computer's USB socket, then driven, so to speak from an on-screen display.

He kept it locked in an old briefcase in the study-cum-broom-cupboard where he'd set up his personal computer. At first he'd felt guilty about it, also it had to be said, he felt like a bit of a pervert, but he'd told himself it was an adult toy, that the health magazines assured him most men masturbated, even the married ones – or indeed more *especially* the married ones – that it was good for the prostate, and he was... well... *an adult*.

The computer in the study was a more powerful machine than his laptop, one he used for playing games and accessing the Internet. But this computer was also family machine, so Phil was fastidious about the material he stored on it – definitely no pornography, and he ran an automatic routine for erasing his browsing habits from those sneaky little cache files, just in case. Marty was probably getting well up on these things at school, and Phil couldn't be too careful because the one thing children could never be disabused of was the fact their parents were interested in sex.

After a few evenings of practice with the Virgo, alongside some saucy images he'd found on-line, he began to feel stupid. I mean it was bad enough if Sally discovered him doing it in the conventional way, but she'd probably have fainted if she'd found him actually physically plugged into his computer.

Fortunately, he was distracted from this thorny problem when he discovered instead the world of massively multiplayer online role playing games, or MMORPGs as they were affectionately known – and one in particular called Freedom. In Freedom, players logged on from their computers all over the world and were represented by an in-game character called an avatar. The avatars were breathtakingly realistic, the female ones exceptionally beautiful, and part of the fun was changing their looks and their clothing to project one's own personality or mood.

Freedom contained many different kinds of world, from the

fantastic to the grotesque. There was no real point to the game, nor was it a game as such, but something about it captivated the imagination. One simply wandered about, exploring the scenery and the buildings, and interacting with the avatars one encountered along the way. To him these worlds were like dreamscapes – he could even fly through them! He made casual friends too – men and women in Australia, Brazil, California, Romania. These were the real-world's bored computer literati, cruising via their Broadband connections and exchanging small-talk from behind their lovingly crafted avatar masks.

It had all seemed polite and charming at first, but eventually he felt it was too cushioned from reality to have any impact, to have any real meaning – until that is he encountered a buxom lady avatar called Joranda. It was “she” who finally rocked his senses by introducing him to the relatively new concept of cyber-sex. She was breathtakingly beautiful and skimpily clad of course, and after the briefest of introductions she invited Phil back to her place, (her virtual place, that is) a minimalist designer flat in a tower block overlooking an azure bay.

Phil: Wow! It's very nice here.

Joranda: lol

Phil: Sorry: I'm a newbie. What does lol mean?

Joranda: lol

Phil: Never mind. Where are u from?

Joranda: Oz. U?

Phil: UK.

Joranda: Cool. U gotta Virgo?

Pause...

Joranda: U still there?

Pause...

Phil: Yes. Gotta Virgo. U?

Joranda: I'm a gal. lol. No Virgo. Gotta a Lectric "D" plugged in and buzzin to go tho. U ready?

Pause...

Pause...

Joranda: U still there?

Phil: Here.

Joranda: Is this working for U?

Phil: Oh... absolutely. I was just...

Pause...

Joranda: Just?

Phil: Connecting up.

Joranda: :)

Phil was beginning to catch on. He now sat trembling from head to foot. A side of him wanted desperately to get out of there, to head off

whatever was coming, but the rest of him hung in, telling him it would be impolite now, and anyway, none of it was real, none of it touched anything or anyone. Joranda was not exactly real, anyway – she was a creative splinter of some stranger's imagination, a part of the game.

Joranda's skimpy clothing disappeared and she spread herself on her bed, displaying a very finely detailed vagina and pubic hair. Phil found the menu and clicked "missionary" – he was definitely catching on now. His view expanded to the third person and he saw himself and Joranda intimately embraced – at the same time, he felt the Virgo come to life – as he supposed had Joranda's 'Lectric D, whatever the hell that was, exactly.

Joranda: "MMMnnnnn,..."

Phil: "MMMMMMnnnnnnn"

He caught himself wondering: was he betraying Sally? How could he be? This was just a bit of stimulation in conjunction with a computer image – except, he was plugged into it. It just so happened that a woman in Australia was plugged in as well – at least he assumed it was a woman. Ugh... park that thought for a moment! I mean...whatever, it was purely mechanical. But wait: What was this? He felt long, slow waves of pleasure from the Virgo as if... no, this was not a machine – she was controlling the pleasure she gave him – how? Phil wondered, running the mouse up and down on Joranda's digitised privates, and yes, the avatar responded, as if reacting against his touch.

Joranda: Ow! Not so rough, lover!

Phil: Sorry – still getting the hang.

Joranda: That's better. Slower.

My god! Phil lay back as his loins exploded. He'd stepped out of reality altogether, stepped into either a dream of heaven, or the depths of hell, while sitting in a smelly, airless cupboard, in the middle of suburbia.

What now? Gently he massaged the mouse over Joranda's digitised privates, until finally:

Joranda: :))))))))))

Pause.

Joranda: gotta skip out now lover. Cum with me anytime. CU :x

Sally lay snoring when Phil eventually crept to bed. He felt sick to his stomach now and very confused – what the hell had he just done? But there was no harm, surely? He had not known the woman and she could not trace him. He could simply delete his avatar and reinvent himself afresh as someone else if he so wanted – that was it with Freedom. None of it mattered because he was safe in his little house in his little town, no longer now the Freedom Phil. He was just Phil,

though fretful and unlikely to sleep because, in spite of his attempts at self reassurance, something significant had happened. A step had been taken, like an admission of something: that maybe his real life was so hopeless, he could stoop so insanely low in trying to squeeze even the tiniest bit of pleasure out of it, when he knew all along it was dead.

In the morning he felt he had no difficulty in swallowing down the last of the guilt – he even felt quite manly as he left for work, like a smug tomcat that had been out on the tiles, sowing its wild seed. He had not been factually unfaithful to Sally, just virtually, which he assured himself was not the same thing at all. But he was lying to himself, and he knew his bravado would not last.

He swung by the orchard, but long before he reached it he realised he wasn't in the mood for Tai Chi. It was odd; the last few times he'd been Lara had come down to watch, sitting on the deck and making him tea before he'd departed for work, but the thought of seeing her now made him feel inexplicably sick. He had looked Sally in the eye and felt nothing, but the thought of sitting with Lara, while remembering himself plugged into his computer while a chick from Oz cybered him, long distance, almost had him in tears.

He was motoring slowly along the narrow back road and intending to simply cruise on by but then he rounded a bend and saw Penny's Corsa tucked into the hedgerow by the gate. She'd come! And if Phil wasn't quite empty by then, the remainder of his self respect drained from him and he felt cold, felt the ruin of his life not only flaying the skin from his bones but laughing at him as well. Here's Caroline, it seemed to be saying. You couldn't have her once. But now you can. Go on. Here she is... go on.

Go on.

Go on.

Phil's foot hovered briefly over the brake, but then he dropped a gear and sped away. He desperately needed someone to talk to. It should have been Sally, his sympathetic and intimate other half, except Sally had never been that way for him. And there were some things you didn't even tell your brother, let alone your wife.

CHAPTER 16

It was perhaps his imagination, but whenever the stress levels went up, the more he sweated, the more his back and neck ached, and the more his ear rang. His ear rang loudly and steadily day after day now. He'd missed a few Tai Chi sessions for fear Penny had begun attending again, and he steered clear of the orchard too. Doc Lin was his only lifeline, what with her massage and her acupuncture, but she'd been quick to notice he was missing her classes – this Mr Markham with his stiff upper lip and his nice tie, his polished shoes and his clean skin.

He was a pleasure to massage – not all her patients took the trouble to shower and their dead skin had a habit of coming away under her fingers. Yuck! But Mr Markham was very clean in his habits, just not responding well to the treatment. His pulse was also off today, and there were dry, red blotches breaking out on his face, evidence of the inferno raging within him – again – he'd need the fire brigade soon, she thought.

"Something happen, Mr Markham?"

"Oh... you know, Doctor, this and that."

"No... tell me."

"Nothing really, just work."

"Hmm... not practice Tai Chi, lately."

"Em... I'm practising at home. I've just been a little busy on Sundays."

After searching the Internet, Phil discovered Doc Lin had some competition, that there was a guy running Tai Chi classes on Tuesday evenings in the Middleton Leisure centre. This was a fairly new building – a faceless monstrosity, thought Phil, peopled by body fascists. He'd called in once enquiring about junior 5-a-side for Marty and discovered a hive of ultra fit looking girls who bounced like deranged fools to throbbing beat music, also crazy badminton players who looked like they were going for Olympic gold and seemed so screwed up with anger he'd felt in fear of his life, as if they'd as soon slice his head off with their rackets as look at him. It was altogether a different place from the community centre on Robin Hill, a very different vibe – indeed, intimidating, he thought.

He turned up just before the class was due to start, but already he could see things weren't promising. It was being run by a muscled psychopath dressed in yellow silk pyjamas complete with red dragons on his collar, also on his special slippers. And in case anyone had failed to properly appreciate his authority in oriental matters, he also wore a long sash about his waist decorated with more dragons.

He wanted a hundred quid up front for a course of ten lessons, plus

Phil would have to buy a set of pyjamas and slippers from him, plus some DVD's at twenty quid a go. On top of that, the dragon man said, he'd have to be a member of the sports club which would cost another £600 a year.

Phil was taken aback. "Well... I'll have to think about it," he said, having already decided there wasn't much to think about.

"Don't leave it too long," said the dragon-man. "My courses are very popular."

"I'm sure they are. Well, like I said, I'll think about it."

He bade the dragon-man goodbye. He needed somewhere he could learn – somewhere away from the Robin Hill Centre, and away from Penny Barnes. It was a pity this guy was just too "in your face" – to say nothing of being extortionately expensive. Maybe there was somewhere else he could try, some other low key community centre type of thing – just not the Robin Hill one.

Before passing through the door, he stepped back and held it open for a woman to come the other way. Was it just his imagination or did she have her face turned deliberately away from him?

"Penny?"

"Oh... em... hello Phil. I was looking for Master Evans."

"Master who? Oh, it'll be that pillock over there in the yellow pyjamas. But Penny... what are you doing here?"

"Looking for Master Evans, obviously."

"I know but... well... what about Doc Lin? Have you fallen out?"

"No... but I could ask you the same thing. I thought you liked Doc Lin."

"I do. Very much."

There was a hissing noise as Master Evans turned himself into a blur of yellow silk and performed a set of punching, chopping and kicking exercises that didn't look very relaxing at all. Then, like a human tornado, the martial artist materialised beside them, flicked back his overlong hair and gave Penny an oily smile.

"Are you interested in classes?"

Penny took him in with one slow sweep of her eyes, then looked at Phil. "No," she said, then turned on her heel and walked out.

Of course this was impossible. Phil had only come here to avoid bumping into Penny, and she'd turned up, hot on his heels. It was eerie, as if something joined them together, made them think of the same things at the same time. His mind worked slowly through the possibilities: was she here for the same reason he was? It seemed that even when they went out of their way to avoid one another, something made sure their paths kept crossing. It was maddening! What was the point? If he'd been a hundred years younger and not married, he would have looked upon this as a gift from the gods. He

would have felt blessed. But now he could only conclude that if there was a such a thing as a deity, then he/she/it was laughing at them both.

The leisure centre was a rabbit warren, several big sports halls, all interlinked by miles of squeaky corridor. Phil had struggled to find his way in and now couldn't remember his way out. He paused to get his bearings, saw that Penny was waiting for him.

"It's this way," she said.

"Ah..."

They began to walk together, or rather Phil held back deliberately a fraction of a step, so she might lead him. It was an unconscious thing and he noted in his secret diary later on he had naturally wanted her to show him the way, not just in a physical sense but also metaphorically – to lead him out of his life, his crumbling, decrepit, potholed paint-peeled life – to somewhere brighter and better.

"You've not signed up with that dick-head, have you?" she asked.

"No, no. Sally would have a fit over his fees. I'm sure he's fearsome in a fight and everything, but that's not really what I'm interested in. And he seems to practice his arts more on the surface, you know?"

"Exactly, like I said. A dick-head!"

He smiled. "You worked that out in a nanosecond – it took me at least a minute."

It was really good to see her, he thought. She looked cosy in a soft, baggy sweater, very cuddlesome and sweet. She made him feel good, dangerously good!

She smiled back at him. "Well, that's men for you."

"Ouch. Look, Penny... you didn't come here... well,... trying to avoid me at the Robin Hill place, did you?"

She stiffened. She didn't know any men who were intuitive and couldn't decide if Phil was one or if that had been just a lucky guess. "You're not as daft as you look, are you? Is that why you're here as well? Thinking you'd avoid me?"

He glanced away, blushing. "Well... I don't mean it to sound bad or anything – I... I think you're lovely... I suppose I'm just a bit vulnerable at the moment. And we seem to keep bumping into one another. It's like it means something. That's silly I know..."

"It's not silly Phil. I feel the same."

So, he *was* vulnerable. He'd admitted it, but Penny had already known that, and now she knew he was avoiding her on account of it. Why would a man do that, if he wasn't simply angry with you? Well, it's obvious, stupid: he's trying not to fall in love with you! Or if not love exactly, then lust. But how could he? She was Penny – forty years old, two kids, stomach like a roll of suet, hair like dried straw, and a huge arse, all dressed up in a bag-lady's cast-offs? Was he really so

desperate as that?

He was looking at his feet now, like a shy teenager. He wasn't exactly Michelangelo's David, but he did have something. Philip Markham was still... what? She could only think the word she was looking for was "alive". He was still searching for something. He had not given up, not settled for a bland nothingness, or worse, for a life defined for him entirely by others.

"I've wondered about what it might mean," she said. "It could even be romantic, except it's about twenty years too late for me."

He laughed. "Me too. So, you really were trying to avoid me!"

"Oh, yes."

He brightened. "You were?" then he frowned. "I mean... you were?"

"Yes... yes. I'm sorry Phil."

"It's all right. I understand."

"No you don't, you're just too polite to take offence. If it's any comfort I think you're lovely too."

"Thanks. I mean... look, I'm really not stalking you or anything. I know it seems as if I am."

She smiled. Bless him. She didn't mean to, but she found herself reaching out for his sleeve. She touched it lightly with her fingertips, then realised what she was doing and drew back gently so as not to alarm him.

"I know you're not stalking me. We just seem to be getting caught up in the same grooves, that's all."

She liked his face. It was not the face of someone hopelessly lost – just temporarily confused and there were rays of laughter around his eyes, waiting to make light of the darkest situation, which was both a strength and an endearing weakness.

He brightened now. "Perhaps we should exchange diaries, then we can make a better job of avoiding each other."

"Perhaps we should."

The lines faded and the lightness sank into a faraway look, a philosophical look, a thoughtful look. "Except, why should we?" he said.

He wanted honesty? "Because you're vulnerable Phil, remember? And so am I. And neither of us are looking for an affair."

"Yes, yes. That's right. But aren't we? I mean I don't think I'm looking for an affair. But do people really go out looking or do they just wake up one day to find they're having one?"

"You think about things too much, you know?"

"I suppose I do. But listen, Penny, I've decided I'm not going to go out of my way to avoid you any more. I'll be at Robin Hill on Sunday mornings doing my Tai Chi, because it's the only thing these days that makes me feel good, and I trust Doc Lin. I will also be in Lara's

orchard most mornings around eight."

"You've been avoiding the orchard, too?"

"Yes. I know you've been going there. When I see your car I always drive on past."

She was astonished. "I've been doing the same if I see yours!"

Phil's head was spinning. Someone up there really was laughing at them. "And I'll tell you something else: I'm going to start doing my shopping at Freshways again because I can't find my way round the other place, and it's been doing my head in."

"But I quit Freshways weeks ago. I'm at Tesco's now."

"To avoid me?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"Penny... what's happening?"

"I don't know."

"It'll probably stop now."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure it will. We both know its game now. It knows we're wise to it."

"Maybe. It's funny though. When I was a girl, and really wanted someone to notice me, they were never around. I never bumped into them, even though I went out of my way to contrive a coincidental meeting. And now... when I'm absolutely trying to avoid someone, I'm falling over them all the time."

"Caroline."

"Who?"

"I used to call her Caroline... that person you're talking about. I desperately needed her to notice me, but she never did. It was all sorts of different women, sometimes more than one at the same time, but eventually I recognised them all for what they were, you know, the same projection of something inside of me – something I was looking for desperately but which probably didn't exist."

She felt cold of a sudden and stared at him in disbelief. How could he possibly understand any of this? "I called mine Gabriel."

"Your Gabriels never noticed you? Well, shame on them."

She blushed. "Stop it Phil. I'm not a bit of a girl you can flatter. I'm *not* Caroline."

"I know. I wish you were. That way I'd be unlikely to keep bumping into you. I'm not sure who you are really."

"I'm a stranger in the mist, remember?"

"Hmm?"

"That time on the moors, we said things, like we're saying them to each other now, things people don't normally share so easily, face to face. It's easier when you think you'll never meet again, like talking to someone on the Internet I suppose. We part in the mist, then go our

separate ways. You're tempted to reveal all aren't you, get it off your chest in the safest way possible?"

"Em... yes... quite."

"Then you get married and you stop revealing anything at all except a censored version of yourself, because you're with this person for keeps and you want them to go on loving you, so you pretend you don't have the thoughts you have. Except there comes a point when you realise they don't see you any more. Either they don't know you, or they don't want to know you, or maybe they even want you to be someone you can't be."

"I understand, Penny."

"We'd be like that, Phil."

"Eh?"

"If we had an affair. If we wrecked our marriages and set up together. Sooner or later we'd stop talking. We'd no longer be strangers in the mist, you and I. I'd end up nagging you to take out the dustbin, and you'd get grumpy if your tea wasn't on the table when you walked in of a night."

"And I'd forget what it was like to touch you. Yes... yes... perhaps you're right."

"So aren't we lucky? We can avoid all that by having the foresight to head it off in the first place."

He nodded, chuckling to himself. What a wonderful woman! And how wonderful it was to be talking to someone – really talking, really sharing intimate things like this. But how soon before the intimate things were all talked out? He supposed he and Sal had exhausted their intimate secrets in the first year, and Penny was right, in a marriage you can easily cease sharing your most intimate current self and present instead the carefully censored mask of who you want to be seen as, or who you think you're required to be.

They were by the exit now and they'd paused looking out across the car park, through the drizzle and the fading light, both of them contemplating their evenings ahead, both reluctant to part company. Penny felt it like a rising panic, like she'd better not lose him to the darkening night and the rain. She had to see him again. And all right, she knew she would she him on Sunday morning, or in Lara's orchard sometime, but then he might be a different Phil, a cool Phil, a remote Phil and that would kill her. She had to have him, all of him, right now! But that was just the stupid side of her talking.

Phil's heart was cracking against his ribs. Surely she could hear it? Maybe she wouldn't come to the orchard. Maybe she was stronger than him and she'd stand at the opposite side of the hall at the Robin Hill Centre not looking at him. In his experience women were stronger in situations like that. Through his own panic and over the racket of

his ringing ear, he almost failed to notice that she was speaking to him.

"If you could have your Caroline, Phil, what would she be for you?"

"My Caroline?" he mused. "Well... from being about fourteen I've always needed an intimate woman friend. Someone with supernatural insight, who knows what I'm thinking and what I'm feeling all the time. That's who Caroline is. What about Gabriel?"

"The same... an intimate male friend with supernatural insight."

"That lets me off them."

She noticed the rays around his eyes again, melting his fears by casting light upon them, by making light of them. So, he wanted to be her friend. Then why not let him? He was a lovely man, a decent man. Let him in Penny!

But we're married to other people you stupid woman!

"If I told you I was interested in Buddhism, Phil what would you say?"

"Buddhism?"

"I don't mean I want to become a Buddhist or anything, but just get to the bottom of it – the philosophy, the idea, of seeing things the Buddhist way."

"Well, I don't know much about it, but speaking as a decadent westerner, Buddhism probably has a lot of insights that we could learn from, like how to stop killing each other and how to ease our personal suffering. I could probably do with reading up on it myself. It might help me to stop feeling so guilty and worn down all the time when I'm at home."

"So you wouldn't see any problem with it?"

"Penny, you're your own woman. You must do as you please."

"But if you were my husband?"

"Eh... but... ah! This is about David. Right. He'd have a fit I suppose."

"Would Sally hit the roof, if you told her you wanted to become a Buddhist?"

"As long as it didn't keep me away from home for more than five minutes, and it didn't cost anything, I don't suppose she'd bother. It would just be another of Phil's silly little distractions."

She let out a sharp sigh. "Do you get the impression no one is taking either of us seriously?"

"I don't suppose they are Penny, but then I don't really take myself very seriously either."

That was it, she thought. He didn't take himself seriously at all. If he ever found himself wrong about something, she could imagine him shrugging his shoulders and saying "I was wrong!" David on the other

hand would have swallowed burning coals rather than admit to the smallest error. But that also meant that if Phil was ever right, and someone disagreed with him, he'd probably just go along with what they said, rather than stick to his guns – or he'd slink away, withdraw his support, rather than say what he thought should be done. That was sweet, and soft, but she could see how vulnerable it made him. If she was his wife, she'd probably exploit that softness in him as well. But was a wife not supposed to be a man's intimate sympathetic friend? Was a husband? Where had she and Phil gone so terribly wrong?

"About the Buddhism then... you don't think it's a bad idea or anything?"

"If it's something you're interested in... I don't see the harm. It's not really my business to say..."

"But if you were my friend I'd expect you to say what you thought. So pretend you're my friend."

"Well, if David's very churchy, that's up to him, and others have to respect that side of him so long as he doesn't go ramming it down other people's throats all the time. But equally, he should respect the freedom of others to enquire into whatever they choose."

"Hm... you're right of course, except for the evangelical thing."

"The what?"

"David sees it as his duty to convert others to his view. It doesn't matter how obnoxious that makes him appear, how bigoted or ignorant. He's doing it for the good of others you see? Saving their souls by bringing them into God's light, even if he has to break their spirit first."

"Saving their souls by destroying their spirit? Sounds a bit egotistical to me Penny, not evangelical. Can't you do it in secret then?"

"How?"

"Research it on the Internet or something. I'd go mad if it wasn't for the Internet these days. And I've had a secret diary on my computer for years that no one knows exists. If that ever fell into the wrong hands, Sally would divorce me for sure!"

"A diary's a good idea. I keep one too, and I trust that others have the good sense not to read it."

"Well, I'd be very careful about trusting in the good sense of others, Penny. Good sense goes out of the window when people get upset. And diaries are not the private sanctuary they used to be."

"True, but I've never been one for computers, and David would definitely want to know about it if I developed a sudden interest in them. But thanks anyway."

"It just doesn't seem fair that we have to tiptoe around others at the expense of ourselves."

"I know. Perhaps if we'd both been a bit more honest in the early days, our partners would have had the good sense to steer clear of us."

"You mean it's our fault?"

"We're waking up to the truth of the matter a little late in our lives, I think. And now we're stuck. Anyway... thanks Phil. And if you'll take some advice from a stupid woman who should know better than to give it, try to take yourself seriously a bit more often. I mean even your daftest ideas."

"I wouldn't know how. My kids laugh even at the way I fasten my tie these days. It's hard to take yourself seriously under those circumstances."

"You're serious about Tai Chi though?"

"Yes. Yes, I am. Definitely."

"Then don't give it up." She made as if to leave, but then turned back and this time she laid a gentle hand upon his sleeve. "You're a good man, Phil." She wanted to reassure him, bolster him, build him up a bit. God knows he needed it. Some women didn't know when they'd got it made.

Her sympathy worked for a moment, and he blessed her as the sweetness soaked in through his pores, but his memory of cybering Joranda came back to spit in his eye. He became morose of a sudden, rejecting Penny's sympathy, because he was not worthy of it. So, he was a good man was he?

"You wouldn't have said that if you'd seen me with my wedding tackle plugged into my computer the other night."

This one slid by Penny at first and she had to wind things back a little to confirm what she thought he'd said. As for Phil, he was gazing at her in horror that he could have said it in the first place. That was taking the stranger in the mist thing a bit far. And this was not really a stranger any more.

Penny stared at him, trying to read him. Were they friends then? How deep did this go? What did he want from her? What had he just admitted? Did she really want a friend like this?

"Phil?"

He was backing away now, hands raised as if to ward her off. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's been preying on my mind. Driving me mad. It just popped out. God I'm an idiot!"

"You mean you... cybered someone? Is that what they call it?"

"A woman in Australia. I didn't plan to. I didn't go looking for it. I just..."

"Oh... Phil, are things that bad between you and Sal?"

He blinked away then, blinked back, what? Were they tears? They should have been somewhere else for this, she thought – somewhere less public, but what could one do? He really was vulnerable and she

felt for him, felt the tears welling up inside of her, partly in sympathy for him, partly in desperate sadness at her own impossible situation. She blinked away as well, but at the same time she reached out for him, and they fell into a soft embrace. She felt him patting her shoulders, reassuring her, and she did the same to him. Then she untangled herself and beamed, making light of a most significant moment.

"What was it like?" she asked.

"What? Oh... disgusting. Disturbing. Maybe it's only for teenagers."

"You really plugged yourself in? And her too?"

"Well, yes – the technology's amazing. I'm assuming it was a woman. I mean you never know do you?"

She was laughing now. It was an infectious thing and he laughed with her. Then all the tortured guilt came out of him and he felt the pressure of it easing. He wasn't crazy. He wasn't a cheating husband. He was just a desperate guy, doing the best he could.

It was okay!

People were pressing past them and it crossed his mind that in a small town like this any one of them would know someone who knew someone who knew someone who knew Sally or David and might misconstrue what was going on, but he didn't care. He could look anyone squarely in the eye and tell them this woman, Penny Barnes, was his friend. And it was up to them if they wanted think anything more of it.

"That was very naughty!" said Penny. "What if Sally had caught you?"

"It would have been more embarrassing than I care to imagine. But she'd probably have found it less offensive than the sight of me doing my Tai Chi in the back garden."

She was shaking her head now. He wasn't the kind to sleep around, which was good, but he was certainly ingenious in exploring the alternatives. Men were like that, she supposed. Oh, she was no stranger to a slow hand and a bit of baby oil, but she doubted she could have done it plugged in while some stranger operated an electronic thingamajig, or whatever it was, by remote control. It sounded too mechanical, void of emotion. But then men had the additional problem of thinking about it a thousand times a day – well all men except David of course, who never thought about it at all, and when he did she imagined him whipping himself with nettles to purge his impurities. But for other men, real men, what else were they supposed to do when their life-mates lost interest in them? Was it even natural for a human being to mate for life?

"Do you want a Buddha, Phil?"

"You mean the garden ornament?"

"You'd be doing me a favour if you took it. I had to tell David I was looking after it for you, or he would have knocked its head off. Will Sally mind if you take it?"

"As long as I tell her it didn't cost me anything, it should be okay. But are you sure?"

She nodded. "It's time this Buddhist went underground. I'll bring him to Tai Chi on Sunday. And Phil?"

"Yes?"

"Be yourself. We must always be ourselves, mustn't we?"

"Always, Penny."

"And Phil?"

"Yes?"

"I really don't want us to have an affair."

"I don't want an affair either Penny. But I must be honest and tell you that I do want to know you, to be friends with you."

"Why would you want to know me?"

"Because knowing you is changing me in ways that make me feel better about myself."

"That's good enough. I feel the same. Friends it is then. I'll see you on Sunday."

They shook hands to seal the bargain. She would see him on Sunday, he thought. They had made their own connection now and no longer needed the intervention of fate, or stupid coincidence, or whatever it was called. All the same, he felt nervous about it. Was this the point where the laughing tide turned and circumstances drew them apart, never to meet again?

CHAPTER 17

After negotiating entry via the fiasco of the keys, Sally wasted no time in asking why he was so late. She looked more frazzled than usual and complained that Marty had been whining about his homework, following her round like a lost puppy, asking her about quadratic equations.

"Quadratic what? Em... well I vaguely remember them..."

"But why are you so late?"

He considered lying but he was hopeless at it and didn't see the point anyway. "I went to the sports centre to see if they did Tai Chi lessons... then...*Was there any danger in admitting that he knew Penny? Where was the harm? He'd nothing to hide had he?* "Well, I met this woman I know and we got chatting. I'm sorry Sal."

Sally seemed to ignore the mention of a mysterious woman. She was curious of course, but not enough to let him know about it. Meanwhile, he was thinking it would do her good to think she might have a bit of competition.

"You could have 'phoned," she said

"Yes... I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you?"

Why this? Why that? He didn't know anything, except he felt a bit lighter that evening – lighter, sure, but growing heavier now by the second. "Eh,.. oh, I never thought." He glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes. He was on the spot because of fifteen minutes. Next she'd be telling him that was him all over – *that he simply never thought*!

There were no cooking smells, but he didn't dare ask what was for tea because that would really get her going. When it transpired that there was actually nothing for tea, he fought back a twinge of irritation, thinking of something Penny had said. It wasn't that there was nothing for his tea that made him cross. It was simply that he was hungry, and if he'd known there'd be no tea he would have brought something back with him. And if there was no tea, then why was it a problem he was fifteen minutes late anyway?

"Are we em... going out?" he asked, thinking it would do them good, thinking Sally might have booked a table at a restaurant or something.

"There's a soap omnibus on tonight. I didn't want to miss it, so we've already eaten."

"O... kay..."

She watched him carefully, and he was aware of her watching him. Aware of her waiting for his next words. "Is everything all right, Sal. I really am sorry about being late."

Was he supposed to pull a face? Did she expect him to be cross that his tea wasn't on the table and waiting? But he'd never been like that. That was just too old fashioned and caveman-like.

"Have we any eggs?" he asked, hopefully. "I'll do an omelette." Phil wasn't brilliant in the kitchen, but he knew how to make an omelette.

"They're past their sell-by date."

"Okay,.. I'll nip round to the Co-op and get some more then. And maybe another bottle of whisky."

"You won't make a mess will you?"

It was starting, he thought. No wonder the acupuncture wasn't working. Doc Lin's healing needles obviously weren't as sharp or as precisely aimed as Sally's poisoned darts. "Em... okay. Why don't I go to Richie's, then?"

Yes, you'd really like that, wouldn't you, he thought she was thinking. And whatever she was thinking, Sally didn't like the idea.

"What about Marty's homework?"

"He can come with me."

Marty who had been listening throughout from the sanctuary of his bedroom decided that wasn't a good idea at all, because Uncle Richie was weird, possibly a paedophile, like they were always on about on the news, and more importantly he didn't have a Game Station. "It's all right I can manage," he called.

Ah, thought Phil, Marty knew well enough how to solve quadratic equations – he just had a whole page of them, and couldn't be bothered working every one out for himself.

"Okay Marty. That's fine. I'll see you all later then."

"You're leaving me on my own?"

"But I thought you were watching soaps all night."

What did she want from him? She wasn't interested in being with him any more, but for some reason she still wanted him hanging around. But he didn't want to spend the whole evening wandering listlessly around the house, picking up discarded chocolate wrappers while Sally ignored him. At least at Richie's he could have a good meal, and a damned good crap in peace – oh and a bath as well while he was at it: a lovely long soak without someone outside the door bursting for a wee.

She was missing her soaps. He could see her torn between making it worthwhile his staying, or letting him go. Bid me stay, Sal, but do it nicely. Say you'll turn the telly off and talk to me.

"Suit yourself," she said.

He didn't feel angry: he felt guilty. "I'll be back before the kids go to bed."

"I'm sure I can manage. Just don't make a noise coming in. I'll probably be in bed."

Richard was listening to the cricket on the radio. Phil had never understood cricket, and wasn't interested in joining him, but Rick said he could make as much mess in the kitchen as he wanted. Phil loved that old house. It was like the one they'd been brought up in. There was barely room to swing a cat but they'd always seemed to have more personal space in those days than he ever did now in his detached executive brick-box.

After eating, he ran a bath and sank into it. The silence was like a soft blanket all around him, dull echoes from the tiles and the gentle lapping of the water somehow bringing out the perfect stillness, and for the first time in ages he realised his ear wasn't ringing quite so much.

Looking at his body it was obvious he wasn't the same lithe and energetic youth he'd once been, but he wasn't knackered either – no beer belly, no man-boobs and he needed only to cup his testicles for a moment to generate a reassuring hardness. All right he wasn't going to be attractive to a teenager, but to a woman of his own age? Surely he wasn't entirely repulsive. Or did older women only need a man for taking out the dustbin, a man for shuffling round the house picking up bits of chocolate wrapper? Sometimes he felt like a dog that had fallen from favour, but was still tethered, doomed to end his days in the... well... the dog house.

He had thought about divorce, but couldn't do it to Elspeth and Marty. He had to maintain a pretence for them. He imagined the tearing and the emptiness he would have felt if his folks had split up when he was a kid. They'd not split of course. They'd maintained a companionable togetherness right up to the end, but how happy they'd been was anyone's guess. That had been a private thing between them, not something to be broadcast to the world via the medium of Mrs Emmeline Parker.

But otherwise... yes, it would have made sense. Better to cast things off than work at patching them up, eh? Or did that mean he no longer really loved Sally enough to try. And how much did she love him? She was so cold, so terribly cold – not even a spark of love to light her eyes green with jealousy when he'd told her he'd been talking to a woman – *to a woman he knew*. Damn it Sally, I still want you – *just give me sign that you still want me*!

Penny was waiting in her car when he pulled up outside the Robin Hill Centre on Sunday. He felt the urge to park well away from her, but reminded himself they weren't avoiding each other any more, that they had officially declared their friendship.

"It's in the boot," she said. "Would you help me out with him?"

The Buddha was wrapped in an old school sweater against the chill of an Autumn morning. He would perhaps bring a bit of peace to a

corner of Phil's little garden, he thought, as he lifted him out and deposited him in the boot of his own car. "Can't I give you anything for him, Penny? I mean it was my fault you went out and bought him in the first place, and I know they're not cheap."

"Think of him as loan," she said, then noticed his walking gear in the car: the boots and the pack. "Are you going over the moors afterwards?"

"I thought I might. Sally's father's coming round to talk us into making some investments. I need to be out."

"Won't you... get into trouble for that?"

"I'll say I forgot and swear blind I thought I'd told her. It won't work of course, but Trevor's lectures always put me on edge – a sure way of wiping out a morning's Tai Chi. Are you going walking afterwards? I mean... don't get me wrong, that's not an invitation or anything."

"Hmm... I should be so lucky. My monster-in-law would probably sue for divorce if I wasn't back in time to cook lunch."

"You mean your mother-in-law?"

"I prefer monster. David does whatever she tells him to."

"Ah..."

Phil had been trying to piece together a more realistic image of Penny's husband, trying to flesh out the stereotype he was building up of him. So he had a domineering mother? That was promising! It was something tangible to define his dislike of the man. He had a mother who would not let him go. Or was it that he did not want her to let him go? What did David need Penny for then? Easy, stupid – to be the mother of his children, or perhaps more precisely the mother of his mother's grandchildren. Penny could not be herself because David was not being himself either. Why could people not be content to be themselves, and leave others alone to be themselves too?

"Phil, if I was a bloke, you'd have no problem inviting me over the moors for a walk would you?"

"Of course not."

"Then what's the problem? Go on invite me."

"Eh?"

"Invite me."

"Okay. I'm going for a stroll up Black Hill after, do you want to come along?"

"I'd love to Phil, but I can't. I've got a ton of Brussels sprouts to peel for Sunday lunch. Thanks anyway."

"Okay."

But who was she trying to fool? Penny knew well enough what the problem was, and he didn't know why she'd pushed him into it. Was it to hear him falter, and thereby confirm the impossibility of them

being together in any meaningful way? Perhaps, that was it. But she'd also meant it as a challenge, not for Phil, but for fate. What was wrong with it? Why could a man not be friends with a woman? Why could they not take off for a walk together over the moors and have a gossip?

"Why can't we, Phil."

"Em... because... you've got to peel the Brussels sprouts?"

"No. I mean *really*?"

"Oh... that's easy: because if someone sees us, they'll think we're at it."

"But I'll never have sex with you."

His heart sank. Was that significant, he wondered? I mean he was relieved that was the way she felt, because it meant there was no problem, I mean there was no way they could have sex, ever, but the man in him was definitely disappointed about that, and if it surprised him it was because he had all but forgotten the man in himself.

"It makes no difference," he said. "It's how it looks."

"Who's looking though?"

"Well... Sally and David, potentially. If Sally was chatting to some bloke all the time and going off on walks with him, I'd want to know about it, and I think I'd be upset."

"You would? Well, that's good isn't it?"

He'd not thought of this before. "I suppose it is."

"I'd feel the same about David. Or no, wait a minute. I'd want to kill him, but that's different. That's because he's just an old possession, a part of me I don't want any more, but I wouldn't want him wanting anyone else. And if that sounds perverse and irrational, it's because it is."

He thought about that. "Maybe you're right. But I still want to be with Sally, or at least the way she used to be. I want to go back to the way we were. I'm just afraid we can never turn the clock back, and we seem so stuck it's impossible to hope we can ever get through to somewhere else."

"I know."

"You do?"

"I'm married aren't I? Oh... take no notice of me, Phil. I'll feel better after some Tai Chi. Of course I still want him, but like you said, we're so stuck I don't think we've got the strength to get to where it's good any more, and I hate it the way it is."

"So what do we do? What would David have to do to make you feel good?"

"Oh... nothing dramatic. Just bring me some flowers, or turn up suddenly and say we were off out somewhere, just me and him, that he's booked a table at Verdis or somewhere – off the cuff. Be

spontaneous! Romantic! Make me feel I'm still worth his trouble, that he still thinks of me, dammit! What about Sally? What would she have to do to make you feel good?"

"Well it's a bit more basic, I'm afraid, but men are like that."

"Well... go on. What?"

"Well, you know?"

"No. Tell me!"

"Okay, instead of just lying there asleep all the time when we're in bed, just once in our marriage I'd like her to turn over and... touch me, make it obvious that she was up for it and wanted me right there and then, instead of making me beg for it all the time!"

"Does it always boil down to sex with you?"

"To be honest, yes. Men are like that – no sense in denying it, or feeling guilty about it either. And the longer we have to go without it, the more desperate we get."

"Good," she said. "Why should you feel guilty about it? Good for you. Phil! Well, maybe you should try the spontaneous romantic gesture thing with Sally, then she might start fancying you in bed again. And I'll try the other with David, and maybe he'll think I'm worth a bunch of flowers now and then. Shall we go in?"

Penny took up a position beside Phil who tried not to gawk helplessly at her bottom when she bent over during the warm ups. Doc Lin was bright and energetic as always. She smiled at him and winked, pleased to have him back in the class. He wondered if it was not simply her manner that made him feel so much better, rather than the Tai Chi. She had such a positive energy, too much it seemed to be contained in her alone, and it ended up spilling out into anyone who knew her.

By now they'd learned all eleven moves of the Tai Chi short form and had progressed on to another sequence called the eighteen form – a set of sinewy movements that flowed into one another – stepping, twisting, turning, pushing,.. all gentle and feather-light, like drawing silk, Doctor Lin had said, and even though he assumed it was a metaphor that really only meant something in rural China, Phil understood perfectly... and he was getting the feel for it.

He was beginning to experience a more intense tingling in his palms now when he did the moves correctly, and also a coolness, like chilled water running down his arms. When he had mentioned this to Dr Lin, she'd smiled and told him that was good... that it showed he was practising. And he'd beamed at her like a little boy awarded a gold star for getting all his spellings right.

There were twelve souls in the community centre that morning and they moved as one. After starting them off Doc Lin no longer led them but watched from a corner. They took their lead from no one in

particular, so how they managed to stay synchronised was a mystery to Phil. They were like a flock of birds all turning at the same time as if in instantaneous telepathic contact. He felt Penny was following him because her moves lagged a fraction of a second behind, but before the end of the session, they were together and he shut out the rest of the group, so he could feel his arms and legs move with hers. The rest of the class could follow them or go to hell, he thought.

It was exquisite, the feel of being in sync with her. If only Sally could have known what this felt like! And it was so long since he had been in sync with Sally.

CHAPTER 18

"And how much did that thing cost, then?"

Sally was watching him from the back door as he eased the Buddha down into the border of the garden. "Oh, someone was giving it away at the class. There were no other takers. What do you think?"

Sally thought for a moment. "It's all right I suppose."

Phil breathed easier. *All right I suppose*, was about the best it got these days, when it came to approval. He stood back and looked at the ornament. It had a serenity that he longed to emulate, but it had also once belonged to Penny. For now at least it radiated her presence rather than the glow of Buddha's enlightenment, and he realised now that was a very dangerous thing to be bringing home with him.

Then Phil brought Sally the flowers from out of the car, hardly able to contain his excitement at the thought of her lighting up. She was in the conservatory now, browsing the Radio Times. "You'd better put them in some water then," she said, looking up at him as if she did not wish to be disturbed.

"But... don't you like them?"

"If you want to say sorry, just say it. There's no need to go wasting money on flowers."

"Sorry?" Phil searched his memory for anything he could have done that warranted an apology. "I wasn't apologising."

"And you think that makes it all right then?"

"Sally, what have I done?"

Sally sniffed and buried her attention deeper in the magazine. If he couldn't remember, she wasn't in a mood to enlighten him.

Later, not a hundred miles away in another executive brick-box, Penny slid into bed wearing nothing but a black laced thong and a teddy top. She disliked thongs for everyday wear because by mid morning it felt like she was wearing a cheese wire round her privates, but they were sexy and she knew they caught men's eyes especially when they poked out above one's trousers. You could have a figure like sack of potatoes and thighs like tree trunks, but stick a thong out over the top of your jeans and you'd have men following you round like helpless puppies! David lumbered up the stairs much later, and undressed in the dark - Winceyette pyjamas, severely buttoned, top and bottom.

This really isn't going to work, thought Penny.

"Penny, what's that smell?"

"It's probably Poison, David."

"Poison?"

"It's a scent. I found some in my dressing table from last Christmas.

I wanted to see if it was still okay. I think I might have overdone it."

"Hm,.. I think you might. Goodnight, then."

"Good night."

It was midnight when David woke up with a start and one of those guilty wet-dream feelings, to find a foreign body had crept its way inside his pyjama bottoms and massaged his penis until it was poking out like a cucumber.

He held himself rigid, then squirmed, clenching his buttocks and screwing his eyes shut to prevent the thing from going off, but off it went and he lay there, breathless and speechless. And embarrassed.

"Penelope?"

On went the light. He was lying in wet pyjamas under a wet duvet. And it was a work day tomorrow. What the hell was she playing at?

And as if that wasn't enough...

"Penny, what on earth are you wearing? What if the boys were to see you?"

Penny turned aside, then stood up, but was suddenly ashamed of her thong stringed buttocks. The way David was looking at her now made her feel like a filthy hooker. "Oh, for heaven's sake David. I'll get you some tissue."

Maybe it would have worked on Phil, maybe he would have woken up like a raging bull and shagged her brains out, but David just sighed and began peeling off the offending duvet, while maintaining his still erect member at a discreet angle away from her.

Monday morning. The weather was fair, but the season was turning – not many more mornings like this one, thought Phil – fresh and calm and clear. Soon it would be winter and dark – too cold for Tai Chi.

He pushed his way through the little gate and stepped into the orchard. His last memory of leaving home was seeing the flowers on the dining table. It had been on his mind to throw the things away, but Ellie had taken them from him and spent ages painstakingly arranging them. Phil had watched her – such a pretty child, her tongue stuck out a little as she'd concentrated on the flowers, and his heart had ached with love. It had ached also at the thought of the mountain of crap she would have to climb in her life, just to get to the point where he and Sally were standing now.

God help her, he thought.

He knew Penny was there because her car was parked outside, but she wasn't practising. She was sitting up on the deck of the Summer House, wrapped in a thick fleece, sipping jasmine tea. The wind chimes were tinkling and a moody mist of steam hung around her head. It was obvious to him that something had happened; something bad.

"Morning, Phil. Tea?"

"Thanks. Is Lara about?"

"She was. She went back in. Said it was a bit cold for her."

"It is a bit nippy this morning."

They sat together with their tea and Phil felt her mood picking up his thoughts and driving them in similar directions, like synchronised Tai Chi. "You're not practising then?"

She shook her head. "Nah... I just wanted to sit for a while, somewhere quiet – and that's nowhere around my house, I can tell you!"

"Mine neither. Everything all right?"

"Apart from feeling like a sleazy tart, everything's fine."

"Oh dear."

She lifted her face and smiled briefly but it sagged quickly back into a frown. "I tried to surprise David in bed last night."

"You did? And?... Sorry, that's none of my business."

"Yes it is. It was your idea."

"It was not!"

"Oh come on, just let me blame you for now. I'll apologise later, all right?"

"Okay."

There passed an awkward silence, and then Penny said: "Well, aren't you going to ask me what happened?"

"Em... I'd rather not. That's surely private between you and David."

"Well I'm going to tell you anyway, so you might as well be polite and ask."

Phil girded his loins and asked: "Okay.... what happened?"

"Well, it wasn't like I tried to sit on his face or anything. I just did like you said. I touched him, you know? I wore some nice frillies and a bit of scent and... well, I've not lost the knack, or maybe I should have teased him a bit more. I didn't expect him to come so quick."

Phil was certain this wasn't the kind of conversation they should be having, but they were both adults, and Penny was in full flow. "Well... that's good isn't it?" he said.

"Not really. He's still getting over the shock... oh and the fact that I also own a thong really disturbed him."

"Disturbed? Again, that's good."

"No. When David gets disturbed he starts quoting the bible and whipping himself with nettles."

"Now you're just having me on."

"All right. I'm exaggerating. But only a little."

Phil took a deep, slow breath, fighting back an unhelpful arousal at the thought of Penny stroking a penis while wearing a thong. "Penny, I'm really sorry. Obviously not all men are as depraved as I am! But if

it's any comfort, the flowers didn't work either."

"You bought flowers?"

"Sally assumed I was apologising for something – but I couldn't remember what I'd done, and that just made her angry."

"Ah... she took the negative view. She really is pissed off then. And you can't remember what you did?"

"No, really! I swear she's making it up just to irritate me."

"But I thought Trevor was coming round to badger you into something, and you just took off over the moors without an explanation. No wonder the flowers didn't work! I'm surprised she didn't make you eat them. I know I would."

Phil couldn't believe he'd forgotten. He'd lied to himself so convincingly he'd actually managed to convince himself it was the truth.

"Oh, God, I'm losing it! After talking to you everything just went out of my head. It's like I hypnotised myself or something. I convinced myself I really had told her."

"It's a good trick if you can remember how you did it. Can you teach me?"

"Look, I am sorry about you and David. But maybe David's thinking about it now, maybe he'll pay you a bit more attention. If a woman put her hand in my trousers, I know I'd be thinking about it."

"But what would you be thinking?"

"Well... that I'd like her to do it again of course."

They were quiet for a while, then the summer house door creaked open a fraction in the breeze. There was an old futon inside covered with a tartan travel blanket. It was a little dusty but dry, an old Chinese rug covering the boards. The wind chimes tinkled sweetly and Penny looked at the futon, and Phil looked at the futon. Then they looked at each other and knew instantly they'd been caught out thinking the same thing, if only briefly.

Phil pursed his lips and shook his head slowly. "Ohh... we're going to get burned, Penny."

Penny was shocked by how easily she had imagined it. It was just pique, she supposed: rejected by one man, so you seek reassurance with another. Phil was right though; they were going to get burned.

CHAPTER 19

"So, Phil, what is it that you most want to achieve in the next five years?"

Phil blinked away from Scrotum's gaze. Scrotum was the name he'd privately given to Adam Winter, his manager, the smooth cheeked youth who was now conducting his biannual Performance Review. What was he supposed to say? Redundancy at fifty-two? Early retirement with a small pension and the freedom to practice Tai Chi whenever he wanted? Or was it to get divorced and marry Penny Barnes? Perhaps they could swap partners. David sounded more of a suitable husband for Sally – not so horny... how did David manage that? Phil envied him. Or was David just as horny but more guilty about it and better at shutting the thought down before it turned into an erection, and the desire to shag the pants off someone?

"Phil?"

"Eh? Oh... well... obviously we need to refurbish the machine shop, Adam. I shall be redoubling my efforts to present a firm financial case."

Adam nodded, his expression blank. It was the right answer, even though both he and Phil knew there wasn't a hope in hell of getting money for anything. Spread sheets and presentations were cheap – machine tools cost money, and you could cut metal far more cheaply in China – probably faster too, so what was the point? That's what global capitalism was all about, after all: Devil take the hindmost.

But in his mind Penny was still stroking him wearing nothing but a lace thong – a thin string between those magnificent buttocks. And while she stroked him, she was smiling, teasing, chatting to him, making saucy small-talk.

"I'm sorry Adam, what was that?"

"I said have you anything more to add, Philip?"

"No... I don't think so."

Adam was happy. He had twenty-five Performance Reviews to get through, and Phil was always the first – a pushover, an easy one to break the ice because he never argued about anything. Phil seemed to have discovered the secret of bovine acceptance. Adam could put a tick in a box now and tell his own gaffer that he'd started.

Phil sighed. Maybe he was getting past all this. Certainly, forgetting Trevor was coming yesterday, forgetting even to feel guilty, and convincing himself it was okay to go for a walk after Tai Chi, all of that was surely a sign of approaching dementia! The old fella had gone that way in the end, and Phil wondered if it was hereditary. But he'd been distracted that's all. Penny had distracted him. What were

they trying to do? Patch each other's marriages up?

He felt for her. He imagined her sexily dressed, her guard deliberately lowered, because that's what sex is... that's what love is: you lower your guard, you accept the danger of a rebuff, and so does the other person. That's the only way your softer sides can ever meet, the only way to ever know love. And she'd feel stupid afterwards, maybe David had even said something about the way she was dressed, not just pulling the guard down but slamming it on her fingers.

And then you meet someone by chance, someone who's nice to you, someone whose smile makes you feel like a million dollars, and all because you're so starved of love. And what are you supposed to do about it? Nothing?

But Penny was right. She'd already run it far ahead in her mind. She and David had had the same start as everyone, the same sparkle at one time. Who was to say it would not happen again? Especially if you never saw it coming. The dining dead, as Jim Carrey had called it in "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" – everything said, everything talked out, nothing left except to nag or be nagged.

They were better as they were. Better preserving this... what?... what was it? Friendship?

"Sally, so I'm sorry."

"You've remembered now have you?"

"I've booked us a table at Verdis, tonight at eight. Richie's coming over to sit. He'll be here in an hour."

Sally paused. It was the Richie bit she didn't like, but maybe that was irrational – he just didn't seem grown up somehow, and it was a bit late for him to start now. "At Verdis? Can we afford it?"

"Sal, we've not been out in ages. It's hardly extravagant."

She smiled. God, she smiled! She melted, she beamed. "All right. And I forgive you. But next time Dad says he's coming over with a scheme, just say no."

"I do say no. I say it all the time... but he never takes the hint."

"We don't save enough Phil. And you might be made redundant. We do need more money at the back of us."

"I know. I'll think of something." But he wouldn't. There was no solution no point in thinking about it and he knew he'd just go on doing what he'd always done, which was mainly trusting to luck.

Sally showered and came into the bedroom while Phil was changing his trousers. There was no shyness about her and she dropped her towel without a self conscious thought, then pulled out nice undies from the drawer, semi-naughty in wine red and lace, which he half wondered if he'd be peeling off her later on, and which she then spoiled by yanking a pair of tights over them. Stockings and suspenders were too much to ask, he supposed, and then he smiled to

himself because he knew he was being childish. This was an apology, it was a spontaneous romantic gesture. At the very best it would end in two bottles of wine, a drunken coma and a bad head in the morning – and it was only Tuesday.

Melting Sally enough for sex was the last thing he should be thinking about!

Meanwhile, Penny was clearing up the last of the mess in the kitchen when David came in wearing an expression that looked like the prelude to an apology.

"David?"

At the age of fourteen, David had been beaten black and blue by Angela who'd caught him masturbating. His dad hadn't seen the harm but it was Angela who wore the trousers and things were very different in those days. He would go blind, he would go deaf, he would become weak and sickly, he was giving in to the devil inside of him.

For David, growing up, sex had been a forbidden thing, a dirty thing, so any hope he had of a fulfilling relationship in that department were ruined at an early stage. His own boys, he knew, lived at a time when sex was trivialised, where it was okay to get laid at twelve, find out you were pregnant and then have an abortion before you were thirteen – where schoolgirls were on the pill and dressed like trollops, giving the impression they were permanently up for it, and all the things that had been forbidden to him were now openly available, tempting his boys away from the straight and narrow, tempting them into the gutter. Oh, all right! He knew he was uptight about things. He knew his mother could be difficult and that Penny hated the sight of her, I mean *really hated her*, and she just swallowed it for his sake, but what could he do? Tell his mother not to come round any more, to back off, to stay the hell away!

"I'm sorry Penelope."

"What's that?"

"Last night... you em... took me a little by surprise that's all."

"I did? I mean... no... I'm sorry David."

In a way he'd surprised her too... at least the bit while he was asleep. His penis had swelled instantly at her touch and felt so hot and hard suddenly she was afraid it would burst and she would have to call an ambulance. Yes... it had been the hardness of him, of the unconscious David. But the conscious David would have squirmed away, ashamed to let her see it, ashamed to let her touch it, as if it were an evil thing attached to him, a mark of his sinfulness, a mark of his filth.

"No, I'm sorry. And I didn't mean to sound so... well, you know? I do love you Penelope."

Easily said David, but do you mean it? How can you mean it if you won't touch your wife and you jump a mile when she touches you? What kind of love is that? She pressed his hand, felt his muscles twitch as if he'd considered flinching away for a moment – which was normal, poor soul. And then she patted his arm.

"I know. And I love you too," she said.

It was true David loved her of a fashion, but he loved Jesus more. And it was for Jesus' sake he had eventually confided in his mother he'd found a booklet on Chan Buddhism hiding in Penny's bottom drawer, confided also that the Temporary Internet Files folder, which he inspected on a weekly basis for evidence that his boys might be developing an interest in pornography, contained alarming trails to web sites of a heathen spiritual nature. The boys were pretty savvy about the Temporary Files Folder, also the cookie folder – Penny didn't know about them and so was easily caught. His mother reminded him about the business with the garden ornament, and was not placated when David told her it had now been safely returned to its owner.

And thus it was, Angela's curiosity became acutely aroused over the possible identity of the said "owner" and, being generally of a more suspicious and melodramatic nature, she decided she had to take action on her son's behalf. Two and two were made to equal eight, being the number of steps along the Buddhist path, apparently, and the mysterious owner was charged at once with the corruption of Penny, into whose heart David and his mother had spent the last fifteen years trying to pour Jesus.

David would have left it there – indeed he did leave it there, but Angela wondered if other forms of corruption had been involved as well. Certainly her daughter-in-law's bottom drawer contained underwear of an immodest nature – at her age as well! But did that suggest she might also tend towards indecency in her private life? And surely these heathens were all the same in that department. It was a tricky business of course, because Penny was so hard to read. Fortunately though David's mother was a very pragmatic woman, though possibly ever so slightly deranged, and merely engaged the services of a private detective.

CHAPTER 20

Doc Lin was a quietly competent instructor of Tai Chi. She was also adept at Qigong, a very old technique that synchronised the breath, the mind and the body, and she was a patient teacher. Paradoxically, it was her lack of airs that made it hard for her to keep certain serious types of student, who instead tended to drift towards the more visually impressive Dragon Man, at the Sports Centre, whom Penny insisted would not have known Qigong if it had struck him in the Dan Tien. And without a feel for the internal system encouraged by regular Qigong practice, Tai Chi was no more than dancing.

But Phil and Penny and Lara and the Hairy Bear man, whose real name was Arthur, were not serious types of student at all, merely attracted to Tai Chi by the tranquillity it lent to their lives, and so got on famously. They enjoyed the instruction on Sundays, but also began to value more and more the practice in Lara's orchard. Hardly a day passed when someone would not visit the orchard, and often there were half a dozen from Doc Lin's class, some practising, others drinking tea and looking on from the deck. Lara was delighted by their company, and her good nature was never imposed upon. Others brought tea and biscuits to replenish the stocks in the Summer House. Someone swept it clean inside and dusted and washed the curtains on the little windows.

Penny and Phil continued to practice push hands together, until Doc Lin took it a stage further and showed the class how the push hands technique could be used as a form of wrestling. Phil enjoyed the wrestling, though preferred to partner the Hairy Bear Man, as it didn't feel right wrestling with Penny. For one thing, she was too aggressive – too much bottled up frustration that needing venting. He would ache after wrestling with Penny, but her zeal also made her easy to unbalance, to tip over. Once or twice Phil had sent her staggering and then he would be beside himself, worrying he'd hurt her.

One Saturday afternoon Phil managed to wriggle out of the usual shopping trip and called at the orchard instead. He was delighted to find Penny's car in the lane. There was another car too, one he didn't recognise but when he walked through the gate he realised it probably belonged to the Hairy Bear man. Penny and Arthur were sparring in the grass, both in a low stance and seeming to take it in turns to send each other staggering. Penny loved to wrestle and Phil smiled at his own softly-softly approach – Penny probably thought him a pussy. Lara was on the deck and Phil sat beside her.

"I do hope they're careful," said Lara. "I must admit I don't really care for this aspect of the art at all."

"Don’t worry, Arthur's a gentle soul. I'm sure he'd do nothing to hurt Penny."

"It's not Penny I'm worried about."

Phil laughed. As usual, Penny was being far more aggressive and had already overbalanced Arthur several times, sending him hopping and laughing like a little boy.

"When I was at school," said Phil. "It was always the girls who played the roughest."

"I suppose there's no harm. And they do seem to be having fun. Penny looks so sad most of the time, like she has the weight of the world upon her shoulders."

"Problems at home, I think."

"You know, she said the same thing when I asked her about you."

"You've talked about me?"

"Oh... don't look so worried. I know it's none of my business, but we're curious creatures we females, and I'm too old to be discreet when there are things that need saying, so I hope you'll forgive me."

"Is there anything to forgive? Really, I'm flattered you should think me worth the trouble."

"I know you have your problems too. But you do look much brighter these days, Philip.

"Well, I feel brighter. I feel younger. I don't know what it is – the acupuncture, the Tai Chi..."

"Perhaps the company."

"The company certainly."

Lara gave a little twinkle. "You and Penny seem close."

"I wasn't just meaning Penny. I've never had much of a social life, but suddenly I'm among people I find I can relate to. People like you and Arthur and Doc Lin. I'm almost grateful for my ringing ear otherwise I would never have met any of you."

Lara smiled. "But you and Penny are *particularly* close, I think."

"We find ourselves in a similar situation at home. We're just helping each other along a bit."

"I'm not judging either of you, Philip. You're both lovely people. Both vulnerable. A man needs a wife to take an interest in him, and a woman needs a man to make her feel loved. Be careful, you don't end up fulfilling those needs through each other, at the price of your marriages."

"We’re both aware of the dangers, and neither of us wants an affair, Lara."

"I've watched you together. When you do the form, there's a stillness about you both that's quite eerie. A stillness and a quiet dignity. I would hate to see you both dragged down by something... sordid."

"We'd hate that too. Perhaps we're conceited to think we can rise above our human natures, but circumstances seem to have brought us together for a purpose – if it's only to provide a helping hand and a listening ear."

"But you can talk to me, Philip. So can Penny. My door is open. And it might be safer for you both that way."

"Lara... I'm very grateful. That's very kind of you. Do I detect the voice of experience?"

She smiled knowingly. "I was married for forty years, but that doesn't mean it was plain sailing all the time."

"But they were mostly good years?"

"Half and half, I'd say. The worst period was when my husband developed an interest in a young lady who worked behind the make-up counter at Boots. He was fifty-two and she was nineteen. It was ridiculous of course, and he saw that in the end. It wasn't all his fault: I was neglecting him in a certain department and we girls don't always appreciate how important it is for a man to have a wife who is also an attentive and imaginative lover."

"You forgave him?"

"There was nothing to forgive, Philip. The girl didn't even know he existed, but I found his letters to her... letters he probably never even intended sending, but he was thinking about her, and for as long as he was thinking about her, he wasn't thinking about me."

"She was his Caroline then."

"I think her name was Agnes."

"Oh... Carolines have many aliases, Lara. A Caroline can be a devious pixie for sure, but I can spot her a mile away, and Penny is no Caroline. Penny's presence in my life is a reality. She's a real friend. One of the few I've ever had."

"Invite her round to dinner at your house then, if she's your friend."

"I know where you're going with that and you're right: Sally would kill me."

"And can't you see, Philip, whatever you share with Penny, even as your friend, you deny your wife. Everything you say to Penny, every bit of hurt and pain you reveal to her, you should be revealing to Sally."

"Unless there comes a point when you really can't share things with your wife any more. A point when you're just hiding from the obvious, trying to keep things going for the kids, a point when everything there used to be between you has gone."

"You loved each other once, though?"

"I do still."

"Then it can be rebuilt, renewed."

"It depends on Sally."

"Then talk to her, tell her everything you've told me – except the bit about Penny of course. No sense in being... *too* honest."

"I know you're right about this. But I feel powerless. Is it just cowardice? Is it just that it's easier to talk to someone who's sympathetic, than someone who's likely to bite your head off or break your legs?"

"Well, I suppose if love is gone...?"

"Even then there's no reason to split up. People who don't love each other can still be together and rub along quite nicely – so long as they don't expect too much from one another. So long as they don't expect... well,... love. I'm sure many older couples get by like that."

"That's fine, but you must at least expect fidelity."

Time was up. The tea was drunk and Phil had ten minutes to get back home before Sally began watching the clock. It was too late for Tai Chi, but the talk with Lara had calmed him almost as much. He waved goodbye, being careful not to pay any undue attention to Penny. Then he left the orchard with some regret, noticing as he did so yet another car, parked a little way off, tucked into the bushes, the driver hidden by a newspaper. It was a funny place to be parking at that time of a Saturday afternoon, he thought.

Penny followed him out. She was working that day, but her shift didn't start until later, so there was no hurry, but she was feeling guilty about playing with Arthur and ignoring Phil, so she trotted over to say good bye.

"Everything all right, Phil?"

"Sure."

"Why don't you wrestle with me any more?"

"I'm afraid of hurting you, Penny."

"Oh, come on, don't be so soft. I like it when we wrestle."

"I'd rather dance with you. Lara and I were just saying how we're not sure about this wrestling business. It seems too rough for what we thought of as a gentle art."

She thought for a moment. "I know. I think I prefer to dance as well, but sometimes it's good to play rough – gets it out of your system – like punching a bag. I'm much nicer to the children after I've been here and had a wrestle with someone. But anyway, what else were you and Lara talking about? You looked so serious."

Phil wasn't sure he should say, but Penny was bound to hear of it sooner or later. "Lara knows," he said. "I mean about us."

Penny grew pale and she felt her stomach heave. "But what is there to know? There is no *us*." Well there wasn't was there? "Will she tell, do you think?"

"What is there to tell? All she knows is that we're not having an affair."

Penny didn't understand. "Then?..."

"She's concerned we might think that's the only option open to us. An affair, I mean."

"But we know it's not. It's not what we want at all."

"What do we want then?"

"Phil, it would please me to see you and Sally happy and in love again. And it would please me to have David back the way he was when I first met him."

"I feel the same. I'm sure there's a way through this for us both – we just have to work at it – that's what they say isn't it? You have to work at a marriage and maybe we're not working hard enough, or we took our eye off the ball somewhere. But we will manage it."

Penny smiled. "Yes, though in my case I think that might involve taking out a contract on my mother-in-law."

Phil chuckled. She was in a feisty mood this morning. "Well, Sal and me are going out for a meal next Friday. The flowers didn't work, but we had a meal a while ago and that was better – so I'm trying another spontaneous romantic gesture, a different restaurant."

"Good for you! Have you any other tips for me?"

"Well... I've been thinking about that... about what men need or expect from their marriages – apart from sex, that is – and I suppose a playmate's quite important."

"I've already tried that, remember?"

"No... not *that* kind of playmate. I said *apart* from sex. I mean someone to join in with our little hobbies. It would have been great if Sal had come to Tai Chi with me - even if she didn't take it seriously. I think a man likes a playmate. It's just that I've never had one since I grew up, and certainly not since I got married."

Penny had obviously not considered this before and her eyes lit up at the thought of it. Maybe! Or maybe not... maybe it would work with a normal man, a man with hobbies, a man like Phil, perhaps. Sure – she'd be a willing playmate for Phil, she thought – go walking, fishing maybe, Tai Chi, dancing... cheer her man on while he played rugby. She'd even watched the blokes in the park with their radio control aeroplanes and fancied having a go herself. But David?

"David's not like that, Phil. He doesn't play at anything. He has his job, and he has the church. Full stop. He sees everything else as childish. As for him coming to Tai Chi... well..." She rolled her eyes in despair.

"There must be something. Does he read? You could try reading the same stuff perhaps – even if you hate it. He might see it as taking an interest in him. We're very simple creatures, Penny. Anything that inflates our self image, our ego, is bound to work."

She frowned. "He doesn't need me to inflate his ego, it’s big enough

already. And no, he doesn't read – well except for the Bible of course. And that repels me... at least the way he uses it to back up his arguments. Then I listen to him and his mother sniping at people in the congregation in a way that's un-Christian to say the least, and I just go cold. That's something I can't share. Something I'm too busy running away from, that whole religion vibe. Uggh!"

"He can pluck Bible quotations out of the air, just like that?"

"You bet – probably out of context though – not that I would know of course."

Phil gave a whistle of approval. "That's impressive!"

Penny arched a warning eyebrow. "Impressive? You should try being on the receiving end of it!"

"It's difficult, Penny. I can see that. But I'm sure there's a part of David that needs reassurances other than Biblical. And if you can find out what they are, maybe he won't be so overbearing in other ways."

She sighed. "I'll think about it, but it'll be a lot easier just to kill his mother."

He smiled, and prayed she was joking. "I'd better go,"

She looked tenderly at him, then caught his arm. "Thanks Phil. You have a good day." Then she reached up and pecked him on the cheek. It was a friendly gesture, filled with sincerity and a genuine affection, but nothing more, and Phil understood that, though it still moved him. She knew he understood, and she liked the way he did not flinch when she rendered herself vulnerable to him.

When she drove away, she was thinking of hobbies, things David might be interested in – surely he'd had hobbies when he was younger? Perhaps she could encourage him to rekindle them. Maybe she could get him a novel – nothing too racy though, nothing with lots of effing and blinding in it either.

As he watched her depart, Phil was thinking about dinner on Friday. He'd booked a table at a French restaurant his colleagues had recommended. Sally had been thrilled and a little nervous – they were neither of them gourmets. He was wondering if he should buy a new shirt, and maybe a different after-shave, but he'd run out of time and really had to be getting back now. Sally was definitely less abrasive, now he'd begun surprising her a bit more, and he was grateful to Penny for pointing out what should have been obvious to him in the first place. But there was a long way to go. The question of their sex life wasn't even on the radar yet, but her new found tolerance had at least dissuaded him from experimenting any further with the business of cybersex.

And that was a good thing.

Meanwhile, the stranger in the parked car was thinking his job had turned out much easier than expected, and at tea time Angela Barnes

handed him a cheque in the lounge bar of a public house she would never otherwise have frequented. In exchange she received a picture of her daughter-in-law kissing a man who was not her husband.

The stranger was a private detective – not a particularly good one, but this was Middleton and not Chicago. He was no world weary Philip Marlowe, but a prematurely retired draughtsman called Herbert Blakedon, who was simply trying to make ends meet in the most interesting manner he could think of. Angela, unfamiliar with the minimum standards one should expect from such people, seemed happy with the results, indeed she regarded the photograph later that evening in the privacy of her study with a certain smug satisfaction.

There had always been something unsettlingly rebellious about Penelope – the way she attended church reluctantly – slipping away as soon as possible afterwards... and ready to skip it on the slightest pretext – like this Tai Chi business. And then there was the infuriating way she seemed always to avoid being pinned down by any of Angela's provocations. The girl was like smoke, disappearing from your gaze one moment to materialise somewhere else, always just a little out of reach.

Well, she had her now!

Except, Angela lingered a little too long over the photograph and Frank, tiptoeing up behind, as if not wanting to break too many eggshells, was puzzled by it. He'd come to ask if Angela wanted a cup of tea and was now suddenly filled with foreboding. Then he saw the invoice headed: Blakedon Detective Agency, and his worst fears were confirmed. A red mist descended.

"You stupid woman!"

Angela's heart leaped. "Heavens Frank! Do you mean to give me a heart attack?"

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!"

Angela, thinking she'd succeeded also in driving a wedge between Frank and his daughter-in-law, gloated over the apparent double jackpot. "Yes, isn't she!"

"Not Penny! *You*! Tell me this isn't what it looks like."

"I'm afraid it is, Frank. This is our daughter-in-law being indiscreet with another man."

"Rubbish! What I mean is, tell me you haven't hired a private detective to follow Penny!"

"Well I did as a matter of fact, and it's just as well from the look of it. I knew there was something funny going on."

Angela gradually woke up to the fact that Frank was actually angry with her. She didn't know whether to take offence or find it amusing. Frank had always been too soft on Penny. They had been unlikely allies in all sorts of business, much to her disapproval. Well this would

put an end to that.

Frank grabbed the picture and tore it smartly in two, then fed it into the shredder. "You're not thinking straight, Angela. You don't know how dangerous this is. It might destroy their marriage. Think of the boys. Think of David!"

She looked at him sympathetically. How could anyone be so dense? "That's a print from a digital photograph, Frank. All I have to do is run off another copy."

He could feel the anxiety rising, his chest beginning to tighten, his temples swelling. "The picture shows nothing. She was just giving the man a friendly peck – he might be a... well I don't know, who is he?"

"She probably met him at that oriental class she goes to."

"You mean you don't know? God, what kind of a detective did you hire? So he's a friend, perhaps, an acquaintance? Your sister gives me bigger pecks than that – are you suggesting we're having an affair too?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Frank."

"The only one being ridiculous is you, Angela."

"Oh, you're so naive."

"If you showed me a picture of her in bed, sucking on this man's how's-your-father, then I might be persuaded to admit you have a point, but even then it would be none of our business. You've no idea what you've done. Hiring someone to follow Penny... it's despicable. What possessed you?"

Before Angela had a chance to gather steam and come back at him, Frank stomped away, slamming several doors in a fit of pique. She fumed quietly for a while but decided to let it drop, secretly impressed by Frank's dander. And of course, he was right: she'd read too much into the photograph.

Oh, she knew what she was looking at all right. Penny's eyes were closed as she kissed this man, her fingers lightly curled around his arm, her expression stupidly blissful. The angle of them, the mood of the picture – it all spoke of intimacy and secrets shared, but Penny could easily explain it away, as Frank had done – as no more than an innocent peck on the cheek. Angela was on the scent now though; she smelled blood and she was not about to let it drop. Herbert Blakedon would be getting another call in the morning.

Meanwhile, Frank sat in a daze in the lounge. They all played willing parts in Angela's universe, played them the way she expected them to – him the docile mouse of a husband, David the dutiful son who was always slighting his wife in order not to upset his mother. And that was fine, insidiously debilitating though it was, no one got physically hurt. Also, when they needed a decisive weapon, someone to send into the shop to do battle with the snotty sales manager, or the

call centre fob-merchant, they all relied on Angela's uncanny ability to retain her rational arguing skills while otherwise shouting-hot with a formidable anger.

Except Penny.

Penny was the only one who still knew how to stand on her own two feet. She was the only one Angela had not succeeded in removing the legs from, to replace them with castors – all the easier to push her around with into the positions she preferred. But this... this was different. This was like upsetting the chessboard because you didn't like the way the game was progressing – it didn't just take out the offending piece. It affected all of them, to say nothing of the other party – the mysterious stranger whom Penny was seen kissing... and *his* family.

It occurred to him then that his anger was not on account of Penny being unjustly accused of adultery. Indeed, though it would have surprised him, he would not have blamed her for seeing another man at all. The adultery was not the point. It was playing the game, and it irked him that no one could understand that any more.

His own father had kept a mistress the whole of his married life, but he'd been careful to give everyone sufficient room to pretend otherwise, and had never publicly done anything to bring shame upon them. So long as it was all feasibly deniable, it didn't matter a damn. Anyone could have exposed it if they'd had a mind to, but no one did.

One never poked a grizzly bear with a sharp stick, just to see if it was really asleep. It simply wasn't done! No wonder society was in such a bloody mess! People seemed no longer capable of grasping even the basics!

CHAPTER 21

Phil was sure he'd used to notice his ear ringing every day, intruding into all the other sounds he experienced – the whine of computer hard-drives, the thrumming of his car, the rumble of machinery at work. It was still ringing, but now he could go for a few days at a time without noticing it. Either he was just getting used to it, or he was getting better. He didn't dare to hope, in case such unguarded optimism set him back. It would be the answer to a prayer though if it was getting better, because he couldn't keep the acupuncture up for much longer.

Sally's father had told her more than once that it was all nonsense – primitive medicine for the rural poor of China, while the urban rich went to see proper doctors. Phil could still hear Sally quoting these words back at him as if they were her own, but it was Trevor he knew he was speaking to. And how much was it costing? A hundred a month? We should be investing that – have you thought about how we're going to afford to put the children through university? If you gave my dad that hundred a month he says he could tie it up in some really high yield shares for a while and come the time, we won't have to worry about tuition fees.

Sally was careful not to reveal the full extent of this conversation to Phil because she knew he was funny like that, but she wanted that money, and she wanted it now. Phil would be okay about it, she'd decided because he seemed more like his old self lately, quite pleasant and easily persuaded.

They'd gone for Boeuf Bourguignon because it was the only dish they could translate into something meaningful. Phil had settled into the atmosphere of the restaurant straight away, which surprised him because he was usually ill at ease in any social setting – he'd even had a friendly joke with the waiter, which was unusual for someone so self absorbed, but now, as he was enjoying his main course, Sally brought up the subject of the acupuncture yet again. Phil took it on the side of the head, not sure where the ball had come from.

"But... but it is working, Sally."

"How can it? It's all nonsense."

"My ear's not ringing now. It used to ring all the time."

"Then it was all in your mind. Or it was going to get better on its own anyway."

"Well I've thought about that, and you could be right I suppose. But I honestly think there's more to it."

"Well, either way you can give it up if it's cured."

"Em... sure, but I'd just like to go another month or two. Doctor Lin

says I'm improving, but I'm not quite in balance yet and I might end up going backwards if I give up now."

"Well she would say that wouldn't she?"

"I know what you're thinking, and I'd agree with you if it wasn't for the fact that I do seem to be getting better – not just my ear: I feel really good – more energy than I've had in years, sleeping like a baby... I'm even starting to feel better about my job."

Sally wasn't persuaded. "I'm really happy for you, Phil," she said, sarcastically.

"You should try it."

"No thanks. By the way, I've been meaning to ask: attractive woman is she, this Doctor Lin?"

Phil's mood finally gave way under the unexpected needling of Sally's tone. He was upset, and surprised the feeling could have come on him so suddenly. They'd been getting along really well – and the atmosphere in the restaurant was so pleasant, the meal so good, and Sally's dress so pretty – he'd half hoped he might even risk moving things along a bit in the bedroom department later on, but suddenly she was sitting there with a sharp stick and the balloon of his fantasy was draped in tatters over his face.

He sighed, letting the air out of him until his lungs were flat and he had to draw a sudden breath. "Yes, she is," he said – no sense in denying it, he thought. "Lovely personality too. And I admire her. She's not been in England long, and didn't speak much of the language at first, but now she manages very well. I imagine myself upping sticks and trying to manage in China as an Engineer, and I know I wouldn't last five minutes. But her? She's sharp, energetic, confident in herself and really gutsy... but kind of serene with it, you know?"

"And young?"

"Not especially – about my age possibly, maybe a bit older. Hard to tell."

"Do you have fantasies about her?"

Sally would have been horrified to know just how many women he'd had fantasies about – at least until he'd gained a handle on this Caroline business. But it was a bit galling to be accused of fantasising about a woman he'd particularly avoided making that mistake with. Also a woman he cherished in other ways.

"That's a bit cheap, Sal."

"So you have then. It's all right. I understand: it's just your age."

"No, it's not. You don't know anything about it."

"Why doesn't the good doctor want to practice in her own country?"

"I don't know. The money's probably better over here. If she's any sense she'll make as much money as she can, before going home. She

still has family in China."

He knew where this was leading. Sally was thinking Doc Lin was taking their hundred a month and investing it in her own future, when they could have been investing it in theirs. But Phil's mood was soured and he wasn't sure they had a future at all now. True, they'd been getting on better and Sally hadn't mentioned the Tai Chi business recently, but that was only because he wasn't practising at home any more – only at the orchard, gone underground so to speak, in order to avoid giving offence. It was the same as Penny, reading the Bhagavad Gita in her breaktimes at work to avoid upsetting her bigoted oaf of a husband.

It was funny how quickly hope could be shattered and leave you standing there feeling foolish for daring to have had any hope in the first place. It was also easy at such times to resent all the more the person who seemed to be making a fool out of you. It was his health for fuck's sake! Why couldn't she trust him on it?

He imagined himself struck down with some terrible disease and wasting away for want of a very expensive drug that the cash-strapped NHS couldn't pay for and Sally simply tut-tutting and refusing to hand over the bank book because she wanted a new carpet instead – or an en-suite bathroom. All right – maybe that was going a bit far, but if she was sick, he imagined he'd move heaven and earth to make sure she had what she needed, and even what she didn't need she could have anyway if he'd thought it might make her feel better. Sure, she knew her own mind, he thought. He'd let her do whatever she decided was best for herself, even if he thought it was stupid. Did that mean he didn't love her any more? Or had he just grown up and realised you must respect others for what they are and not for whom you would like them to be?

He thought of the Tai Chi, and smiled. It was something he wanted to do, but he couldn't talk about it for fear of upsetting some strange prejudice in her. Or sometimes he brought it up because he knew the very mention of it irritated her. Oh... this was hopeless! Did she want him to run off with someone else? Well he bloody well could you know? He could do it very easily!

He set down his knife and fork and pushed the plate away. Then he drained his wine and resigned himself to leaving his dinner half eaten – even though the bill for it would probably cost more than a month's acupuncture, but he couldn't face another bite.

Sally knew she'd gone too far, but she wouldn't leave it alone. "What's the matter? Aren't you enjoying it?"

He gazed down at the mess of diced beef and onions – a ruin of a meal, now – brown gravy curdled and shell-holed and heartbreaking, like the Somme, he thought: a hopeless stalemate in the mud, one in

which it was accepted men would be lost in their tens of thousands every day, and for no good reason. It had puzzled him all his life, why no one had looked upon that staggering loss and said – hold on a minute this is stupid. Was his marriage like that? Why did he have to keep taking bullets all the time? He thought of Penny, remembered the softness of her innocent kiss upon his cheek that morning, outside of the orchard, and he felt like crying.

Sally persisted: "I said aren't you enjoying it? Honestly you're on a different planet these days."

"I don't think I want any more, Sal."

"Oh? And I'm supposed to just sit here and eat mine then am I, with you sulking at me?"

"I'm not sulking, Sal."

"Yes, you are."

"Sally, you've been talking to your father, haven't you?"

"Well – can I not talk to my dad? Am I not allowed?"

"You know it bothers me that you discuss our private business with him."

Sally flushed and went quiet. The last thing Phil wanted was a row, especially here, and he regretted saying anything. Now he was trapped and what had begun as a pleasant evening in a lovely restaurant had transformed itself into an ordeal in a torture chamber from which there was little hope of early release. What was he going to do? Who could he talk to about this – well Penny *obviously*, but that wasn't fair on Penny, and what had Lara said: every confidence he shared with Penny was a confidence he should have been sharing with Sally. Except he could no longer share anything with Sally. What was a man to do when his wife could no longer be his friend? A man needed a female friend. It could be his wife, or someone else – that was up to his wife and she was bloody stupid if she couldn't see that.

No. Don't be an insensitive ass, Phil. Just try a bit harder. Show a bit of backbone, man!

He set down his napkin admiring for a moment the smoothness of the linen while he gathered courage, then he looked up directly into Sally's eyes to see if there was any trace of the woman he had married. She was older of course, a little more heavily set. She was still a beauty, except her lips were taking on a permanent droop, a permanent scowl when she relaxed. He asked himself once more: Was it his fault she was so unhappy?

"Let's pay up and get out of here," he said.

"What? We've only just arrived. What will they think?"

"I don't care what anyone thinks Sally. We need to talk."

Her eyes darted nervously from side to side and Phil fancied she was looking for a way out.

"Come on, I'm going," he said.

He paid at the bar, mumbling some excuse about being called into an emergency meeting at work. He almost felt himself swelling with self importance as he lied through his teeth, that he could ever be so important, that he could be called at a moment's notice into an important meeting on anything!

He was going to have it all out with Sally – tell her they couldn't go on like this. He was going to drive her up to that quiet lay-by on the moors where they'd used to go when they were courting, and he was going to ask her if she still loved him, ask her if she still wanted to be married to him. And if she couldn't look him in the eye when she replied, he was going to ask her if she wanted to carry on – if not, then he'd move out in the morning.

Is that man enough for you?

The only problem with this plan was they'd not come in his car – it was Sally's and she had the keys. *Damn!* If he told her to drive them up over the moors for a serious talk, she'd tell him to get lost, drive home and go to bed, shutting him out with a sulk. And he'd just downed half a bottle of wine anyway, so he couldn't drive them anywhere.

"What's got into you?" she said, trotting up behind him.

"Drive us up over the moors, Sal. Let's go and visit that lay-by where we used to go."

"At this time of night?"

"We used to be up there at midnight sometimes."

"That was a long time ago, when we were both stupid. No, I'm going home."

"Give me the keys then. I'll drive."

"You're drunk. Get in or walk."

So he had to say he'd walk, didn't he? Even though they lived way across town, some three miles. She'd really given him no other option and though she put it down to his mood and his pig headedness, it was really her fault. And she couldn't see it. She was taken aback though, perhaps realising there was something deeper about his melancholia than usual.

"Suit yourself," she said.

Phil pleaded. "We need to talk, Sally."

"Then let's talk at home."

"I think it's home that's the problem."

But she was already settling into the car. She waited for a moment, but Phil was reeling and he couldn't bring himself to go near the car, to submit, to go quietly home with her. Home was for bed, for the scent of her, the feel of her stockings against his legs, the taste of her – but that home was so long ago now he wasn't sure if it was real or

imagined.

Then he watched as Sally drove away.

CHAPTER 22

Phil was not drunk, or he would not have felt the cold as much as he did. He'd left his coat in Sally's car because the evening had seemed warm enough for the short walk across the car park, but now, dressed only in his suit and a thin shirt, he was beginning to shiver. He also had the funny feeling someone was following him.

The guy had been there since the restaurant, about twenty yards behind. Phil might not have noticed except he was an unnaturally fast walker and tended to leave most people behind as he strode out, as he was doing even more than usual now in an attempt to warm up. The guy had short legs and was having to take two steps for each of Phil's which lent him the air of someone scurrying along, anxious not to be left behind. That was what gave it away really – someone in so much of a fluster would at some point have gained on Phil, and overtaken. Phil kept slowing a little to see if that's what the person wanted to do, but no – he was definitely following, maintaining a distance. Phil told himself it was ridiculous and he was just being paranoid, except he'd crossed several roads now, and taken a few side-streets on purpose, and the guy was still there.

He paused by the window of the Comet Superstore in order to catch a glimpse of his stalker. It didn't look much like a teen mugger – no baseball cap, no hooded top or lavishly expensive trainers. This man looked like a retired headmaster: spectacles, a Trilby hat and a long trench-coat. A trench-coat? Was he a flasher? Did they still call them flashers these days? I mean he couldn't be a detective looking like a, well, a comic-book detective, unless he was being ironic, could he? And what had Phil done to warrant attention from the boys in blue?

He set off again, quickening his pace a little more. He felt confused and numb when the man fell in behind him once more. He wanted his brain to tell him what it meant, but his brain refused, like a computer program looping uselessly over the obvious: *I'm being followed, I'm being followed.* He turned into an alley, then nipped smartish through a little shopping arcade before doubling back, skipping down some steps and into the retail park where he dived into the perpetual crowd that haunted the all-night supermarket. He had his fingers around his 'phone by now, ready to call the police, but he'd never called the police before and he wasn't sure if he could describe this as an emergency. But then what was an emergency? Being stabbed to death by a deranged man in a trench-coat? It was a bit late for 999 then!

He lingered in the wide open doorway, warming himself on the terrific up-draughts of heated air. The crowds were a comfort, as were

the uniformed security men. From there he scanned the street from a position of confidence. Let the bastard come now, he was thinking. But he'd obviously given the man the slip. Phil looked around, feeling suddenly foolish and catching a glimpse of himself on the monitors suspended over the doorway. Big brother was watching you, they said, and by the way don't you look a lot balder on camera than you thought you did in the bathroom mirror? The security men, two large guys were also beginning to eye him suspiciously. Shoppers had a particular look about them, he supposed and after a while, to a bored security man, they'd fail to register – but someone else, someone who was not a shopper would stand out on their unconscious radar. It started to rain, so Phil slipped into shopper mode and thought it would be a good idea to have a look around for an umbrella. Then he decided a coffee would warm him up first, so he made for the café and grabbed himself a tray.

"Phil?"

He closed his eyes in disbelief. There was no need to look up.

"Pen?"

She was waiting by the till, looking very attractive in her uniform, he thought, but then he'd always had a thing about girls in uniforms. She was always pleased to see him. Always smiling, always making him feel good.

"I thought you worked at Tesco's."

"I do, part time – the rest of the time I work here. Did you just call me Pen, by the way?

"I think I did, yes. I'm sorry... I..."

"No. I like it. No one's ever called me Pen before."

"They haven't?"

"You'd think they would wouldn't you – I mean in forty... em... something years, you'd think someone would have called me Pen before now."

"They used to call me Baggy at school."

"Really? I was Snotty. That's one pound sixty please. And I'm sorry, but the coffee in here's really bad."

"I know. Any port in a storm though. Snotty?"

"Yes, Snotty Totty."

"Really?"

"Well, you know what kids are like. I didn't think I was snotty. Anyway, why Baggy?"

Phil paused for a moment, unable to believe he was having this conversation. Had he slipped into a parallel universe? "Oh... they used to mix me up with a lad called Peter Bagshaw. It could have been worse. They called him No-neck, as I recall."

"I prefer Phil. Though you can call me Pen any time you like.

Anyway – why are you looking so smart?"

"Oh... Sal and I, we've been out for a meal at Chez Nous.."

Penny looked over his shoulder and Phil shook his head. Penny looked at him enquiringly "Sally's not with you? How did the meal go?"

"Bit of a disaster really. Sal took the car. I'm walking."

Penny covered her mouth – a mixture of surprise and dismay. Yes! She was genuinely upset for him. "You're in the doghouse then?"

Don't be upset for me Pen! Just say the words – don't mean them. I want you to be glad things aren't working between me and Sal! Right now I want you to want me.

"Afraid so," he said.

"Whatever did you do?"

"I can't remember exactly – though I suppose it was my fault... I think."

"And then the first thing you do is come in here and find me?"

Phil didn't want her to get the wrong idea. "Honestly, Pen, I didn't know you worked here."

"It's all right. I know you're not stalking me. "

That was good then; the last thing he wanted was to end up getting on the wrong side of the only sympathetic female he knew.

"It's still happening isn't it?" she said.

"Yes, but I'm getting used it."

"Me too."

"I mean its impossible, and I feel really stupid when I'm writing my diary of a night because no future social historian, or even a nosy parker, is ever going to believe me!"

"You write about our meetings?"

"I write about everything, including everyone I meet – well anyone who means anything to me."

"Is that... wise do you think?"

"Don't worry – like I said before: It's encrypted and the key goes with me to my grave. And anyway – we've nothing to hide."

She smiled mysteriously. "Haven't we? Your coffee's going cold. Why don't you have a seat. I'll come over and join you, while it's quiet."

"Won't you get into trouble, idling with a customer?"

"I'll just say you're my parole officer."

"Penny... you're insane."

"Pen, remember?"

"Okay, Pen."

Oh yes, Phil might have enjoyed that, settled in for half an hour with this delightful woman, this woman who was not Caroline. I mean who else did he most need to speak to right now – apart from Sally.

No APART from Sally! And who had been the first person to pop into his mind as Sally had driven away, leaving him stranded outside Chez Nous? He was about to nod his agreement when he saw the flasher just coming into the restaurant and his happiness vanished. What was really strange though was that Penny saw him too, and froze.

Phil looked at her. "You know that guy?"

"He's been idling in here all day – watching me. It sounds like I'm paranoid but he sat over there with a newspaper this afternoon and made his coffee last an hour. And I'm sure I saw him hanging around the orchard one morning."

"You're joking!"

"I wish I could say I was. Do you know him?"

"He's just followed me here from Chez Nous."

Penny gave a shudder. "We were having a laugh about it, me and the other girls – wondering which one of us he fancied. Are you sure it's him?"

"Well, he's not exactly inconspicuous is he. Look, I'll keep his attention fixed on me, while you go and fetch the store manager, see if we can't find out who he is."

Phil took his coffee, and feeling not a little like James Bond in his suit, sat as far away from the flasher as he could, but in plain view, facing to the side, so as not to frighten him off. If the store manager wouldn't help, he'd have to call the police, and he made ready with his 'phone. After a little while he glanced over and, behind the flasher's back, caught sight of Penny, and a somewhat youthful looking bloke who was stroking his chin thoughtfully. He whispered something to Penny whose mouth opened wide for a moment. The manager looked concerned and was reaching for his walkie-talkie perhaps to call the security men over, but Penny stopped him, shaking her head, then she came over to Phil in a daze.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Eddie knows him," she whispered. "He's Herbert Blakedon. Middleton's own private gum-shoe. No don't look! He'll think we've rumbled him."

And though he did not doubt Penny's word, Phil tipped his head back and laughed. "No way. That guy? But he looks too much like a comic-book detective to be a real one."

"Either that or he's just rubbish at it. Word is he’s a bit... eccentric."

"You mean a bit strange. Poor guy."

"Poor guy?"

"Well he's obviously just trying to make ends meet."

"Do you try to see the good in everyone?"

"Sorry, I'm just relieved. I thought he was a mad axe-man or

something."

"Well, no. It turns out he's just a ridiculous private investigator instead ,who's making ends meet by trying to CATCH YOU AND ME AT IT!"

"Eh? But he'll wait a long time before that happens, Pen."

Penny sighed. Phil was a dear man, and a love, but he could be a bit slow sometimes and she had to take hold of both his hands before she could focus his attention. "Someone hired him, Phil."

"Well, I suppose so..."

"Sally do you think?"

He was catching up now, and as he caught up, his thoughts grew darker. "I don't know." He was horrified to think they might have drifted so far apart that such a thing was even a possibility. "She mentioned something tonight that irritated me... made me wonder if she half suspected me of being up to something, but it was with Doc Lin. But she was only teasing – going on and on about the acupuncture business again."

"But it *could* have been Sally?"

Phil felt the floor opening beneath him. "It might have been. But why has he been watching you if it's Doc Lin I'm supposed to be shagging?"

"Good point."

"Could David have hired him?"

Penny seemed calm but she was pale and Phil could feel her hands trembling a little. "He would if his mother told him to," he said.

"Pen, I think I feel sick."

"Me too," she gave a nervous laugh, wondered about crying, then about becoming hysterical, but as usual chose objectivity – you didn't spend a decade and a half as intermediary between a couple of squabbling kids without learning a thing or two about objectivity. "So, what do we do?"

Phil could feel the anger in his veins now and he struggled against it because he knew it was useless." I could call the police."

"Eddie was going to set security on him – but I said no."

"Why?"

"Well... because..."

"Because?"

"Do you really want him to know we've rumbled him? Because that opens Pandora's box and eventually leads to us finding out who hired him? And do you want to know – I mean really?"

Phil understood what she was saying. And no, he didn't want to know. He just wanted the strange little man to go away – the rest he could do himself: shut it out, ignore the possibility his wife had had him followed, and Penny felt the same. That way they could both go

home and pretend everything was still all right. But that was cowardly wasn't it? He and Penny had nothing to hide. It was insulting. Damn it, he wanted to know who suspected them of something dirty.

"I'll just go and ask him," he said.

Penny grabbed his hands again, urgently this time. "No," she said and then: "My God, don't look but I think he's just taken a camera from his pocket."

"Is he stupid?"

"He's put it on the table, under his newspaper. I think he's taken one it must have been when I was reaching up to grab you just then. How would that have looked? Could you read something into it, do you think?"

"This is ridiculous. I'm calling the police. Who does he think he is?"

"NO! I'm going back to my till. You'd better drink up, then go home."

Phil thought ahead, thought about the remaining two-mile hike to his house, thought through the fiasco of the keys and decided he'd rather stick pins in his eyes. "I'm not going home tonight."

"But you must! It'll only make things worse between you and Sally. She'll think you're still sulking at her."

"Well I am still sulking, and things could hardly be any worse."

"Do you often stay out all night?"

"I've never done it before. But I can't face going back. I'd rather sleep round at my brother's – and he lives nearer."

"You have to go home, Phil. Whatever's happened between you two tonight, you can't leave it. You can't sleep on an argument... on unsaid words."

"We've been sleeping on unsaid words for years. Sometimes I think it's only the fact that neither of us speaks our minds any more that we've managed to stay together as long as we have – and are we really having this conversation with a private detective sitting over there? What if he's got a parabolic microphone or something?"

"A pair of what? It doesn't matter, does it? He's just after catching us in bed, and as you said, that's stupid."

"I didn't say it was stupid – just unlikely. Maybe it would be easier all round if we did have an affair. One of us is obviously suspected of it."

"What do you mean, *easier*? I thought we both agreed that would be pathetic! We're worth more than that."

"I know, I know. And you're right, but it seems to me, both our problems stem from the fact that we've neither of us turned out to be what our nearest and dearest want us to be. No matter how hard they try to fit us into whatever neat little box they've labelled for us, we keep falling out of the bottom, we keep peeling the labels off and

doing our own thing.

"I'm sure David would like nothing better for you to become a pillar of his church, so long as you didn't outshine his mother in piousness. And Sally... I don't know what Sally wants from me. I was handy to have around when nappies needed changing, but the kids are older now. She'd be quite happy moving in with her father, I think, and taking the kids with her. Sure – I can see how my having an affair would make things easier for her. Maybe that's the little box she's put me into and labelled it: 'playing away'."

"You're talking rubbish, Phil!" But Penny had the uncomfortable feeling he was right – about David anyway. She'd always felt the same thing herself – that there was this box labelled dutiful mother and obedient churchgoer. But Sally? Could a woman just discard her husband when she got tired of him, when she ran out of uses for him? "At least I hope you're talking rubbish. Look, can you hang on ten minutes? I'm due to finish, then I'll drive you home, if that's the only way of making sure you actually go home. If Sally knew you felt this way it might shock her into being a bit more sympathetic. So tell her."

"No way! Have you ever told David to his face how much you resent his mother interfering all the time?" She went quiet suddenly, which was not his intention. "Sorry, Pen. I didn't mean that. I shouldn't be taking this out on you. "

"No, you're right... I've never told him. I just assume he must know, that he's an ass if he can't see it." She shrank a little more inside of herself and Phil tried to reach her, but could not do so without leaning over and embracing her, without warming her with his body, sealing up the wound that he'd inadvertently inflicted, healed it with his own flesh and his desire to protect this woman. Protect her, he thought? Well, yes but only because his own woman no longer seemed to need him for anything at all. And was there anything wrong in that? Was it childish or merely human – the desire to feel needed and wanted and cherished? Phil was coming down on the side of childish when he eventually followed Penny out of the supermarket and crossed the car park to her Corsa.

"You've gone quiet," she said. "It's all right – you've not upset me. Don't ever be afraid to speak your mind with me."

"I'm okay. And I will... always speak my mind with you. After all, it seems it's not speaking our minds that's got us into this mess in the first place."

"I know... and so we're both to blame, but it starts out as such a little thing, doesn't it? And it seems so petty to mention it, so you leave it, don't you? But next time it's grown a little, and then it grows a little more, until it's become so big you don't know where to start. And then you're afraid of it."

"Hm... like it used to be a playful little puppy, annoying you when it nibbled the toes out of your slippers. Now it's a rabid wolf and you're afraid to go anywhere near the damned thing."

She smiled. "Ever thought of being a poet, Phil? Take my advice: *don't*."

"Ha. Thank you. Is this what they call gallows humour? Can you see our little gum-shoe?"

"He's got into a red Astra, driven by a woman with big hair and glasses."

"An accomplice? He's called for backup. They're getting ready to follow us then."

"It seems so. But it's the last thing a mistress would do, surely – drive a bloke back home to his wife?"

"One would think so. But then never having had a mistress, I don't know how these things work."

"Just get in, Baggy."

"Yes, Miss Totty."

Phil sank into the Corsa settled deep into the scent of it. It was the scent of Penny – private, comforting... invigorating. "I see you don't drive the boys around much in this?"

"How do you know?"

"Too tidy. No chocolate grubbed into the seats and bits of torn paper and those little plastic twisty things, all over it."

"Well, you're right actually. The car's my last refuge of order and sanity. When we go out as a family I try to make sure we go in David's."

"Ha. Very wise." Phil winced at her use of the word family. She'd just reminded him she was not simply a 'Penny', she was also a 'family' – a man, a woman and two children – just like him. It emphasised the distance between them, and though he understood perfectly well they could never be together in that way, it still hurt to be reminded of it.

As they drove, the Astra fell in rather clumsily behind them with an overly dramatic squeal of tyres.

"Not exactly MI5," she said.

"Well, this is Middleton; I don't suppose there's much call for that kind of work. Take your time, Pen. Don't let them spook you."

"I know, I know. Come to think of it, I've seen that car before – the furry dice give it away. It was definitely parked down the back lane by the orchard one morning. And I remember thinking: furry dice?... ughh."

Penny drove steadily, while the Astra struggled to know what it was doing – sometimes sitting on Penny's bumper, then, as if realising it was too close, it would drop back before racing up again in order to stop other cars getting between.

"Someone's going to get hurt here, Phil."

"Perhaps they think we're going to... well... I mean where would we go for a quickie? Where did we go when we were young? There's no chance of driving up over the moors I suppose, just to wind them up?"

"Do try to be serious."

"I can't. This whole thing is completely mad!"

"Well, we're not going up over the moors. I'm going to drop you at the front door, and wait in the car until Sally opens the door to you. Explain me away however you like, so long as it's the truth."

"Can't you drop me round the corner?"

"No. Take a deep breath and remember we've done nothing either of us need be ashamed of admitting to Sally, or to David."

"Except you forget one of them's crazy enough to believe just about anything *except* the truth."

"Relax now. Is this it? Which house? Ah... I can see your car. Nice cul-de-sac. Quiet. We get a lot of noise from the main road. Is it three bedrooms or four?"

"Four – well three and a walk in cupboard. Four if you're an estate agent."

"Okay, here we are then."

Penny ran the Corsa onto the drive behind Phil's car and Phil didn't know whether to be relieved or not that Sally's car wasn't there beside it.

"It could be in the garage," suggested Penny.

"No, the garage is full of rubbish – no room for a bike, let alone a car these days. She's not here."

"Out looking for you perhaps?"

Phil could feel his spirits sinking – as if they weren't low enough already. It was what Penny had said, about Sally perhaps being out looking for him and the knowledge he should be so lucky if Sally cared that much to bother any more. "I doubt it," he said. "She'll be round at her dad's – that's where the kids are sleeping anyway."

She was quiet for a while, looking at him, this poor weary man and realising she was perhaps seeing the train-wreck of his marriage in a slightly faster motion than he could witness it himself. He was too close to it, unable to see any further down the line – either that or he was unwilling to. She wanted to hug him, lay his head upon her breast, but instead she touched his wrist. "I'm sorry, Phil."

He liked her touch, felt all the sympathy in the world in its gentle pressure, and he brought his hand up, like in Push Hands, and they maintained that microcosm of contact. "Oh, it's all right," he said. "It's not the first time she's done it. But this looks bad for you now – I mean if it was David who hired our gum-shoe. Here you are pulled up

outside your lover's house."

She pressed gently against him, testing his substance. "That's why I'm going to decline your invitation to come in for a bit."

He circled back, playing with her energy, savouring it. "I wasn't going to offer – not that I'm ungrateful – and not that I don't want you to come in."

She liked it, that he could play with her and she pressed again. "I know."

He let her press more deeply into him, as if inviting something. But what? Her confidence? Or was he merely flirting? "Still, looking on the bright side, with Sal out of the house I can have a good night on Freedom. I can plug myself in, see if Joranda's online."

She didn't flinch. "Don't you fucking dare!"

He pressed her back. "I was joking, but that's interesting."

"What's interesting?"

"You disapprove?"

"No... it's up to you how you handle your sexual frustrations – but you'll get caught one of these days. You should get rid of that electric whats-a-jig before Sally finds it. Can't you just do it the ordinary way like everyone else?"

He lost his nerve and broke contact. "Ordinary?"

"Just have a wank, Phil. Close your eyes and use your imagination."

Was she flirting now? No, don't be ridiculous. Was she trying to embarrass him then? Well, he'd show her: "I would but it's catching the emission," he said with a cheeky grin, thinking to get his own back and see if he could embarrass her. "I could use a condom but I'm afraid of Sally finding them in the bin. Same with pieces of stiff tissue – she'd just know, and somehow that would be another sign I don't love her enough."

"Well... have you tried the finger-clamp?"

"The what?"

"You don't know it? Well, since we're all adults here... when you feel yourself coming, you press your finger about two thirds of the way between your scrotum and your arse-hole. You still come, but nothing comes out."

Phil was amazed: "Really?"

"I thought all men knew that one."

"Where do you get this stuff from?"

"I was alive once," she said. "Now get your dirty mind out of my nice clean car, you perverted bum."

"Okay. And thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Take care driving home. Don't let them spook you if they should

start following."

"All right. See you Sunday at the class?"

"Sunday it is."

"Goodnight – and remember get rid of that... *thing* before Sally finds it."

"All right, all right! I'll do it tonight. Promise."

He watched Penny as she backed out of the drive, tried to wave like he was waving at a vague acquaintance, then felt himself shaking as he came to his senses. Was that anger still? Or was it the fear things were seriously falling apart now and he could not hope to pretend everything was fine for much longer. He supposed it was always like this: human beings are such adaptable creatures they can adjust to living in the most appalling circumstances. He'd be telling himself things were fine even if he came home to find Sally had left his suit cases on the drive and changed the locks.

He should have gone to her, he thought, brushed Trevor aside and argued it out with her – told her he was so frustrated he'd subjected himself to the weirdest and most humiliating sexual experience in his life, and that it should have been Sally's hands around his dick – she was his wife, damn it; it was her place, her duty! He would have said all that if he'd cared enough about his life with her, cared enough to want to salvage it, but all he could think now was that he had the house to himself for a bit. All right; dialling up Joranda was a bad idea, but he could at least have a glass of whisky, a long bath and a crap – all in peace.

The Astra made a move and drew his attention back to reality. But being stuck in a cul-de-sac and pointing the wrong way, it had to do an awkward three point turn before setting off at break neck speed, presumably to catch up with Penny. This chap Blakedon was an idiot, he thought, clearly deluded – maybe he was dangerous too. What if he got too close to Penny's car? What if she panicked?

Phil decided to follow, just to make sure Penny got home all right. He had the advantage of knowing where she was going, so he was able to relax and hang back, well off the Astra's tail. He pulled into the kerb a safe distance behind when Blakedon stopped a few doors down from Penny's house. But Blakedon seemed only to take account of the fact that Penny had arrived home, then drove off apparently on business of his own, his work done for the evening. So, Phil followed him across town, all the way to what he took to be Blakedon's office which was a crumbling outbuilding, part of the disused gasworks which was now split off into cheap rented units.

It was a sordid and dingy part of town.

Blakedon's driver followed him inside. She was a substantial lass in her middle thirties, a short skirt and fishnets – not his wife, guessed

Phil. And what were they doing, going back to the office at this hour? A quick one on the couch? Perhaps their night of expense account voyeurism had excited them? He allowed himself a smile at the thought of them pumping away and him bursting in with a camera, to catch them at it.

"What would your good lady say to that then, Mr Blakedon?"

And just as he was telling himself his imagination was getting the better of him, he caught a glimpse of an amorous silhouette, through the frosted glass of the office window, before the blinds were drawn. The irony was not lost on him.

On returning home, Phil drew the silence of his house over him like a warm duvet. He poured himself a generous whisky, took a leisurely twenty minutes on the toilet, then sank up to his neck in a very hot bath. Even when his penis rose from the waters like a periscope, he paid it no attention until he'd soaked the whole dreadful evening out of his system. But later, after the third glass, he was experimenting with a finger pressed into his perineum when he experienced a gloriously deep, aching orgasm.

And it was Penny Barnes who had taught him how to do it!

CHAPTER 23

Trevor wasn't sure he liked Frank that much, but he'd known him for years and they were both of a similar social and income bracket, and Frank wasn't a bad golfer. He was also a good listener and during their Saturday morning knock-arounds at the Hall-i'th-Wood club, Trevor had poured out the whole dreadful business of Linda taking off and leaving him, and Frank, no matter what he really thought, had the good manners to agree with Trevor that she was a cruel woman. He also politely agreed that his son-in-law sounded like a half-baked dope, and that Trevor's daughter deserved better – even though Trevor sometimes reminded him of Angela with his nannying and interfering in other people's lives all the time. But Frank had been unable to offer any supporting anecdotes from his own life, because – well, he rather liked his daughter-in-law, and had by comparison of late grown to dislike his son immensely.

"Well, I sympathise Trevor – I really do. I suppose I'm fortunate with my daughter-in-law. We get on really well."

Trevor, who knew Frank's wife vaguely, and considered her to be a very nasty piece of work, found himself nodding in appreciation. They'd been rained off at the ninth and had repaired to the bar, where they now sat in deep buttoned leather chairs, like a pair of battered war veterans.

"Angela's still very churchy is she?"

"Oh... don't get me going. And David's the same – getting worse if anything. Quoted Genesis at me the other day and I only went round to borrow an electric drill. And I'm his bloody father for pity's sake!"

"Sounds to me like you and Penny are two of a kind. Perhaps you should run off together – good looking is she?"

Frank didn't mind a bit of bawdy banter but he had to be especially polite with Trevor, on the occasions when his jokes veered uncomfortably into the realms of what he considered incest. Trevor could sometimes get a bit above himself, but there was no real harm in him.

"Well, if I was a good deal younger, Trevor... good looking yes. And I am fond of her... she's trying to get into Tai Chi at the moment, and everyone's giving her such a hard time over it – the kids, David, Angela... the whole damned lot of them. They think, oh, I don't know - that she's going over to the devil or something."

"Did you say Tai Chi? The son in law's taken that up – looks a complete dick-head when he's doing it. They got him on film you know, we all had a right old laugh."

Frank thought that sounded rather childish, but said nothing. It

was difficult to know how far to go with Trevor. One had to balance the need to get things off one's chest against how well one trusted the man not to go repeating confidences to others, but Trevor had trusted him in the past with more intimate details than perhaps he should have done – indeed Frank was the only one who knew that Trevor was bonking his housekeeper, and that the housekeeper was quite a perky woman for her age – at least according to Trevor – but then men had a habit of exaggerating such things. Still – he bit his tongue when he felt the detective business welling up inside of him. No – the fewer people who knew about that the better!

But Trevor had picked up on the mention of Tai Chi and was curious to know more. "Where does she go, do you know?"

"Community Centre – Sunday mornings. It's low key, but Penny says the teacher's very good. I'm thinking of joining myself – if only to spite Angela and give Penny a bit of support."

"The son-in-law goes on Sunday mornings. I wonder if it's the same place?"

"It's possible. They might know each other then. I'll ask her next time I see her. Phil, isn't it? What does he look like?"

"Oh, tallish, dark hair, thinning – little round spectacles – looks like a Dickensian accountant but wouldn't know a balance sheet from a shopping list. Hopeless with anything financial and won't bloody listen – and I'm only trying to help for Christ's sake..."

And in that instant Frank knew for sure Penny knew Phil, knew also they'd been captured in a photograph together, and even though there was nothing between them, Angela was intent on proving there was. He felt a flutter of panic, then focussed on the opportunities: maybe there was a chance of defusing the situation. Maybe he could say something to Trevor. But what?

"Actually, you know – I think she's mentioned him. There was some business over a garden ornament."

"The stone Buddha? Yes... he said he'd got it from someone at the class. That was your Penny?"

"Yes... " Frank left it there, not knowing where else to go with it. Meanwhile, Trevor made something of a leap into unknown territory, not exactly suspecting Phil and Penny were having an affair, but rather wishing it, and thinking that without too much trouble, he could perhaps lay the seeds of doubt that would, over time, convince Sally they were. To what end, he wasn't sure yet, but that was for later...

Things were rocky at home for Penny by all accounts – husband sounded like a sanctimonious twat. The problem though was that Phil was hardly a philandering stud – the dope clearly didn't have it in him – but with an amorous, frustrated woman after him, he was soft

headed enough to land himself in sufficient trouble for Sally to give up on him. But Phil? Would he? Might he? Sure he might, thought Trevor – he'd let a woman drag the pants off him, if only to be polite.

*****

Sally arrived home mid-morning to find Phil still in bed and snoring with an empty bottle of whisky on the bedside table. She was glad to see him, relieved he'd made it home all right, but she was still angry as well – not for anything he'd done or said, but just... something. She knew she shouldn't have driven off like that, shouldn't have left him, shouldn't have gone round to her dad's without telling him. But why hadn't he rung to see if she was there? What if she hadn't been at her father's? What if she'd had an accident? And Phil had just walked home, drunk himself into a stupor and fallen asleep – leaving every light on in the house and the front door unlocked. A fat lot he cared about anything but himself! Then he'd be up and about, all bushy-tailed and practising his "thing" in the garden, and not seeing how much she resented him for not... what? For not hating things the way they were, for not wanting to do something about it.

He came round with a splitting head to find Sally sitting on the bed, smiling at him, a cup of tea in one hand and a box of Ibuprofen in the other. Sometimes it's the simplest of things that are the most important, and the sight of her warmed him.

"I thought you were saving that bottle for Christmas," she said.

"Was I? I can't remember."

"How's your head?"

"Bad."

"And your ear?"

"Ringing like stink."

"Phil, I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry."

He threw his arms around her and she came to him willingly. It was rare, he thought, and so he took his time over it, just melting into her, breathing in the glorious scent of her. Then Marty came blundering in with a cocky grin and pulled a face, feigning horror at their ‘disgusting’ behaviour.

"Aren't you both a bit old for that," he cackled.

His horror at parental intimacy was clichéd of course, but then teenagers are walking clichés, willingly sticking on every label that society, or fashion designers handed out to them. Why was that? Was it that Marty longed for an identity so much he snatched up anything that was pre-packaged, rather having the patience to make an identity for himself? It would come, thought Phil, chiding himself for his irritation. It would take time. He was just a boy.

Sally drew away. "Morning Marty."

"Did you have a row?"

That's nothing to do with you, thought Phil. "No, Mummy and I just fancied an evening apart, that's all."

Mistake! Sally had not been "Mummy" for a long time, and Marty could barely even manage the word "Mum" any more.

"I'm not a kid," he said, a sulky resentment never far away.

"No, of course not – but don't be in too much of a hurry to grow up."

"I'm never getting married."

Phil wasn't sure where that had come from. Was it a Freudian slip? Was Marty picking up on the tension between him and Sally? "Well... that's up to you lad, but my advice is that marriage can be a dream come true – just don't have any kids because they'll ruin it."

All right it was a cheap shot, but Marty's ego had been butting up against Phil's for a while now, as if trying to goad his primitive side out into the open for a confrontation. Was Marty trying to prove he was better than his father? Brighter, quicker, stronger? Well, there was no contest there. Of course he was.

Phil wanted Marty to go now before Sally lost her cuddlesomeness, but Marty stood there insolently until Sally had gone, then seemed to smirk with satisfaction. Were all teenagers manipulative psychopaths? Phil couldn't remember how he'd been in his own youth, except that bursting in on his mother and father without a word of apology, let alone mouthing off a load of sarcastic abuse would have earned him a good hiding. But you couldn't do that now. You had to treat children as if they were adults – reason with them, respect them, while they could be as obnoxious and manipulative with you as they liked.

"Are we going into town?" he asked.

Ah, now we're coming to it, thought Phil. "I don't think so, Marty. I've no intentions of standing like a pillock in the games shop while you browse for the latest frag-fest. Anyway you've no money."

"Grandad gave me twenty quid last night."

"And I'm sure Grandad would prefer you to save it, not blow it away on a game you'll have played in five minutes."

"He said I could."

"Well Grandad can bloody well take you into town then, because I'm not."

Phil wasn't sure, but he thought he felt the bed quiver as Marty turned and walked out, as if the lad had kicked it spitefully. But if he called him back the boy would only deny it, or his other ploy was to stand there while Phil tore a strip off him, then look gormless and say: "Pardon?" Meanwhile Phil would just get more and more heated up while the lad scored easy points off him.

It was a bright day, and though late in the season now, Phil was fairly warm in the garden with a sweater on. He slipped out on the pretence of tidying up, but found himself a sunny corner instead and there he stood perfectly still. He took a deep breath, sank his weight down into his legs, raised his hands, as if he were hugging a giant balloon, and he did not move a muscle for twenty minutes. He'd been practising this seemingly pointless exercise every day for a month now and was becoming strangely addicted to the depths of tranquillity it took him to. He was feeling more energetic and much happier that his ear wasn't ringing so often as before – only on those occasions when he drank too much, and those occasions were becoming less frequent.

While he stood, he thought about what had happened last night.

Sally could not have hired the ludicrously incompetent Herbert Blakedon. The detective had obviously followed them to the restaurant, which would have been pointless if Sally had hired him because Sally already knew that's where they were going. So it had to be Penny's family who'd hired him. He'd been too slow to work this out before, but there in the garden, doing Jam Jong as they called it, his mind cleared sufficiently through the fog of his hangover until it all clicked together.

But there was still something that didn't add up. Penny was not exactly a loose woman. She was a good woman, a good mother and a loyal wife, a woman with a lot to put up with – all right: that was his perspective, but she deserved more trust than she was being given, and he prayed she would be all right, prayed that even as his own life fell apart around him he could protect her in some way. It was just a pity the only way he could think of doing that now was to keep as far away from her as possible. They needed a plan, a means of staying in touch – not so they could arrange to meet safely, but so they could steer their way through the coincidences that kept bringing them together.

"Phil? What are you doing?"

Sally was staring at him from the conservatory door.

"It's called Jam Jong."

"I don't care what it's called. Are we going into town or what?"

"I've already told Marty I'm not going."

"Since when was Marty in charge? I want to go."

"Okay. I can practice my standing while I'm waiting outside the shops."

"Don't you dare!"

Was that a smile, he thought? Was she finally coming round and accepting his need to do this. "Okay – my abdominal breathing, then?"

"Does that involve looking like you're about to lay an egg?"

"Not unless I'm doing it wrong."

"Okay then. But you start that Silk Reeling or whatever you call it in the market square and that's it. Okay?"

"Understood, Sal."

So Marty got to the games shop after all, but sulked because Phil wouldn't let him buy the gory game with an eighteen certificate, because he obviously wasn't old enough. So Marty contemptuously settled for a twelve certificate, blew his twenty quid, and played the game for five minutes before deciding it sucked, then punished Phil for the rest of the day with sullenness for not letting him have the one he'd really wanted. And while Phil understood this was the way things were, he found himself unable to rise to the bait, take the boy to one side and rage at him until he wept. Indeed, Phil found he did not care, but settled down comfortably in the conservatory with a novel he'd picked up from a charity shop. It wasn't often he made the time to read, and he realised that was just one more symptom of a life not really lived for himself. Well, he was slowly taking back control, and he read into the evening, while looking forward to Sunday morning and Tai Chi.

CHAPTER 24

Doc Lin was lonely. Both Phil and Penny had come to the same conclusion. She spent all day sticking pins into people and hearing about their ailments, but so far as they could gather she lived alone and her only social contact was with a bunch of ageing eccentrics on Sunday mornings. So, when she announced after class she was planning to arrange a weekend retreat in the Lake District, and there were no takers, both Phil and Penny stepped up out of sympathy, saying they'd be pleased to go. Surely others would follow their lead – Lara? Arthur? But everyone slunk away quietly. It was the word "retreat" thought Phil: it sounded a bit new-agey and weird. Then, knowing how it would look, them being away together, they held back and stared at each other.

There would be other Tai Chi groups going, and other instructors, so Doc Lin would not exactly be alone, but they felt someone should at least go along, if only to lend her some moral support. In the end they walked out of the class, stalemated, leaving both their names on the list of "possibles", while each of them had already decided not to go.

"You go, Pen."

"No... David would never agree to it. You go. Someone should go. It'll be great."

"Sally won't like it if I go."

"I thought Sally didn't need you. Oh... she'll pull a face, but maybe getting away from her will teach her how much she does rely on you. It'll do you both good."

"Either that or make her realise how little I matter. Let's talk to the others – see if we can't persuade any of them to go."

"Okay, but they didn't seem keen to me. There's only us obsessive enough."

"Then we'll toss for it."

"It's pointless – David won't agree to it."

"You weren't thinking about that earlier. You were all for signing up until you realised I was going as well."

"Then we're both guilty of deceit."

"Why can't we go then, the both of us?"

"You know why Phil! Really, you can be a bit dense sometimes. You know? The two of us? Together? A weekend in the Lake District? Think about it!"

Phil glanced over to the Astra parked a few bays away, and at the figure of Herbert Blakedon trying to look inconspicuous behind his Daily Mirror. "I'm not the only one who's a bit dense. I've a good mind

to let his tyres down before I go."

"I think he might notice that."

"You could distract him – go stand over there and fiddle with your top or something."

Penny smiled. "Idiot."

"Or bend over, you know?"

"Flash my thong at him, you mean?"

They laughed, but Phil was left quaking inside at the mention of Penny's thong. How could that be normal? They were both middle aged. Surely such an overwhelming lust should have passed him by long ago. Suddenly he grew serious: "It was David who hired him, I think."

"No. I know him too well. He'd have a guilty look about him – I'd feel something."

"His mother then... perhaps David doesn't know about it yet. Is she capable of that, do you think?"

This struck a chord with Penny. "Yes, that would make sense. She's perfectly capable."

"How can you bear it?"

"Oh... I don't know."

"What will you do?"

"I'll assume it's her, for the sake of convenience, spit in her custard, like I always do, and just get on with things."

Phil turned away, overcome by a sudden emotion. He felt it tearing at him and he didn't want her to see it.

"Phil?"

"It's nothing. They just don't deserve you, that's all. I'd... I'd... cherish you... someone like you. Penny... a man would be a fool not to appreciate you."

"I'm sure you felt the same way about Sally once. And now you take her for granted as much as she takes you. It's the middle game of marriage. We're past that first flush, when you can't keep your hands off one another. That lasts for what? Four or five years? Then what? You spend the rest of the time growing bored and thinking for pity's sake, I'd like to have a decent shag with someone else – *just once* –to remind me I'm still a woman. And if we're lucky we survive such fantasies and stay married. But thank you anyway. It's good to know someone still thinks this old bag-lady's worth it." She opened her car door. "We'd better go. We've been stood about for long enough. Even I'm beginning to feel like we're flirting."

"Okay. Em.. is there any chance of your mobile number?"

"I don't think that's a good idea. Why?"

"I thought maybe we could text each other. Warn each other where we're going to be, so we could avoid each other."

"Phil, are you having me on? Or can you really not see how stupid that is?"

"Of course it's stupid. But I don't know what else to do."

"Caroline must have taught you that you can't manufacture a coincidence. Well maybe you can't escape them either. Let's just take our chances eh?"

Phil nodded as Blakedon snapped them through a hole cut in his newspaper. It made him want to grab hold of Penny and kiss her, kiss her hard and unambiguously, and be done with it! "I'll see you next Sunday then. Bye Pen."

"Bye Phil."

David made lukewarm enquiries when Penny arrived home. Had the class gone okay and what time would lunch be ready? It was just that he and Angela had to see the vicar about the steward rota, that afternoon, so they couldn't hang about.

Lunch would be ready at two, and the class had been fine, thank you. There was talk of a weekend retreat but she wasn't interested – felt sorry for Doc Lin though – such a nice woman, and she wished some of the others would change their minds and go. David made no comment on that but later, when Penny set Angela's special custard before her, she could tell something was afoot by the theatrical expression on the old hag's face. Suddenly conversation turned to Tai Chi, and not in derogatory terms either. Penny was suspicious at once.

"Actually," said David. "We'd... I mean... I'd rather like it if you went on this retreat. It sounds... special. I know you're enjoying it... it would do you good as well, to get away from the boys for a bit."

"Don't worry about a thing dear," chimed Angela. "Frank and I will be delighted to help out. You really must go."

Penny was amazed they couldn't see how transparent they were, nor how foolish they were in supposing she did not know her every move was being watched by a cheap little man in a funny raincoat. Angela wasn't so slow to realise the potential for scandal as Phil had been, and rather liked the idea of catching her and Phil at it, good and proper. But since Phil wasn't going, it was fine. Let them pay Blakedon's expenses for nothing, thought Penny. As for David she was sure he still didn't know anything, but if she ever found out that he did, he'd be getting special custard as well, and it wouldn't just be spit that was in it.

Meanwhile, Phil mentioned the retreat half heartedly to Sally in order to sound her out. If Penny wasn't going, he thought, it would be safe for him if he went, and he really wanted to deepen his knowledge of the subject. But Sally was sniffy at first.

"How would I manage the boys on my own?"

"Well, exactly. That's what I thought."

"You know what Marty's like at the moment. He's a monster."

"I know... I know. I wouldn't feel right leaving you alone, Sal. I'm not going. Don't worry."

And thus was Sally placated, but after a visit to her father she changed her mind and decided it would be good for him to go. And Phil decided he would go after all, though he wondered what the hell Trevor had to gain by letting him go on a Tai Chi retreat – perhaps he thought he'd have more time to discuss his next financial rescue package with Sally. The only thing that bothered him was that he would have to keep quiet about it – not mention it to Penny because he did not want her to know he was going, when she couldn't go. And Penny likewise didn't want Phil to know she was going because he couldn't.

That's how he ended up at a table in a hotel in Ambleside, in the middle of the Lake District one evening, having dinner with Doc Lin. She had not recommended sleeping at the retreat which she'd described as rather a Spartan farmhouse, and that they should stay in a hotel then drive to the retreat each morning. Phil had been suspicious about this and wondered if the good doctor was setting him up for seduction, but now he was relieved to note that the table had three settings and he realised one of the other students must have decided to join in at the last minute. He was wondering who the other place was set for when Penny swept into the dining room wearing a long floaty frock. She was radiant, her hair shining and looking as if a decade's worth of wear and tear had been smoothed from her face. Phil's mouth dropped open, and he closed his eyes. He felt a mixture of delight and horror at the sight of her. Penny drew up sharp when she saw him, and when he looked at her again, he knew she felt the same.

CHAPTER 25

Mr Markham was looking much better these days, thought Doc Lin. He'd stumbled out an apology some weeks before, explaining he would have to call a halt to the acupuncture – so ridiculously polite these Englishmen. His ear was still giving him trouble but it was improving, and he was not so fiery any more. The skin on his face was no longer dry and blotchy, and he moved differently, more smoothly, better balance and co-ordination. She told him it was not a problem, that he would continue to improve, so long as he kept up the Qigong and the Tai Chi.

"Must practice every day, Mr Markham!"

Secretly, she was glad to lose him as a patient, because she'd grown to like him and wanted to cultivate his friendship. Naturally, that hadn't seemed appropriate while she was his doctor and it still wasn't appropriate because he was married, and though she was perhaps a little older, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that they might have become lovers –possible yes, but also quite out of the question. So she was not sure what she wanted from him exactly, only that there was something. He was a sympathetic gentleman, bumbling and polite and perhaps she wanted to understand the West through his eyes, rather than through the stereotype of the lager-drinking boors who frequently vomited on the doorstep of her clinic.

Would he have wanted her though? Yes, she thought. She'd detected an air of embarrassment about him as he had wrestled with sexual tensions other men would have overcome by innocent flirting – no sex at home either, he'd admitted, so he would have been an easy target to flatter and seduce. But she guessed he looked at her and, like many westerners, saw the face of the mysterious east with its counterintuitive philosophies that he hoped would change his life. Sooner or later then, he was bound to realise she was just a human being, a Chinese lady of middle years, and bound to let him down, because he expected miracles from her. Also on a less philosophical note, there was clearly something going on between him and Penny Barnes.

Both had come to her confidentially, to confirm their names for the retreat, each asking that the other not know. This had made no sense to her, since they were both obviously coming and bound to find out sooner or later, but judging from the expressions on their faces now as they looked at one another, she realised that whatever was going on between them was not an ordinary affair.

Penny was also looking daggers at Doc Lin now, but it was hardly her fault was it? "I'm sorry," she said. "But you both told me not to let

the other know you were coming. So I keep the promise. Have you had falling out?"

Penny had been feeling good about herself for the first time in years – new shoes, new scent, new jewels and new frillies. Bugger the Tai Chi – this was freedom! Now though, she felt like a naive schoolgirl who'd been tricked into entering a knocking shop.

"I thought you weren't coming," said Penny.

"I thought you weren't."

Doc Lin smiled. "So, nobody wants to come? I feel so happy. We eat, then go home? Yes?"

Phil sighed. "On the contrary, Doc, we both wanted to come, but we believe our families suspect we're having an affair – and the rest is... rather too complicated to explain."

"But we aren't having an affair," said Penny emphatically as she drew up her chair. "Though I'm beginning to wonder if they wish we were – that it's the only story that makes sense to them... I mean, if that makes sense... which it doesn't. Does it?"

Phil was scanning the dining room now.

"You lose something?" asked Doctor Lin.

Penny shook her head. "No, he's looking for the private detective who's been following us. Could you be a little less obvious Phil? What are we drinking?"

Doc Lin winced. "Wine is so expensive here, Penny!"

"I know, probably rubbish too, but what the hell. Wine Phil? Phil?"

"I can't see him, Pen."

"Forget him. Wine?"

"Yes, why not? Go halves?"

Doctor Lin looked curiously from one to the other. "This is a strange coincidence then, a strange working out of fate perhaps."

Penny nodded. "Tell us about it – this is nothing. I half expect all the rooms to be booked up and the only way I can stay here is if I share with Phil."

"No," said Doctor Lin, smiling, as she entered into the game. "You can stay with me."

"That won't work," said Phil. "You'll only have a single room – mine's a twin, you see?"

"I do have a single room," said Doctor Lin. "How did you know?"

Penny shook her head and chuckled to herself. "Well it's okay, I've got my room and I'm keeping it – so don't go getting your hopes up, Phil."

There was definitely something between them, thought Doctor Lin, and they were more than friends. She had watched them doing push hands together. There was an intense, almost angry energy about Penny when they began to move, and a smooth rhythm to Phil that

calmed her, each perfectly in balance, neither seeking to overpower the other. But they did not have the hungry eyes of lovers – rather they seemed to have the love of later life, like an old married couple, companionable and intimate in a matter of fact way that went beyond the raw newness of first sex.

Phil tried to make sure he enjoyed the meal, settling back and taking pleasure in the loveliness of his dinner companions. He recalled the last time he'd been in a restaurant – that dreadful night with Sally at Chez Nous. This could not have been more different, and as the wine relaxed them, Penny and Phil took the opportunity to get to know Doctor Lin. She, in turn, tried to break down her professional reserve and see Phil as a gentle man and not a recovering basket-case. Penny, she was less sure of. It was easier to know a person when you understood their weaknesses, but Penny seemed the more balanced of the two – good colour, soft hair and skin – all things that tended to dry out in middle age as the balance of life was lost. She was sure the pulse would have revealed something, an emotional problem, perhaps her nerves? There was after all that rather fierce way she began the Push Hands. At any rate there would be some inherent weakness that might have given her a handle on the real Penny, but for now she could only admire her spirit.

The retreat was a farm that had gone bust following the post-millennium foot and mouth crisis. It consisted of a cottage and barn converted into dormitories and lounges, set in eight acres of lush green fell. The former meadows had been split up, some of them planted with bamboo, lots of secret nooks for private contemplation, while looking out over Lake Windermere. There were also large, paved patios for group practice and areas covered with soft wood-chip for push-hands and wrestling.

They arrived early, for morning Qigong, which Doctor Lin had been asked to lead. Phil and Penny found themselves in a group of twenty other souls, doing the Shi Bashi form. They'd done this before and so were familiar with the sequence, but neither of them could relax. They were standing next to one another, taking comfort in their friendship among so many strangers, while glancing around, nervously, uncomfortable with the new age vibe coming from the others – the dreadlocks, the multicoloured sweaters, the piercings. They all seemed much younger, easily led, easily misled. Phil and Penny were interested in Tai Chi because it had begun to ease their middle aged aches and pains, to say nothing of their existential angst. The others were doing it to get high off Qi. The only other middle-ager was an equally uncomfortable looking Herbert Blakedon, who was trying not to stand out in his knitted tank-top and his jumbo-cord trousers.

Worse was to come and by mid-morning they were being treated to a demonstration of the mystical powers of Qi by none other than the Dragon Man. Phil was even less pleased to see him than he was Blakedon and actually groaned, while Penny's eyes rolled up to the sky in despair. Dragon Man strutted out to the middle of the wrestling ring and then chose one of the gullible pilgrims to push against him. It was a skinny girl in striped tights and dreadlocks, and she had little effect on the Dragon Man, who seemed to retreat inside of himself as he resisted her best efforts to tip him over. Then he invited others to join in, to form a chain, each pushing against the others' shoulders with all their might. He held them all at bay without so much as a grunt. Penny took up the rear and then invited a recalcitrant Phil to push behind her, but Phil hung back, shaking his head and pulling a face.

"But don't you think it's impressive?" said Penny.

Phil chewed his lip as Doctor Lin came up beside him. She had a sour look too, and seemed not to approve of the trick at all.

"It's rubbish," said Phil. "Action and reaction. This is Newton, not Lao Tzu – so long as he can resist the first one in the line he can stand there all day – and I watched him deliberately pick the smallest person. Does he think we're all stupid?"

"Yes," said Doctor Lin. "This is also my understanding. I am sorry for this, Phillip. Master Zhou is stuck in airport. Master Evans is clearly not an ideal replacement, and I am beginning to doubt his qualifications."

"Hey you!" Master Evans had emerged from his meditation for long enough to notice Phil standing on the sidelines.

"Me?"

"Get in the line, like I said."

"I was just talking to..."

"Get in line."

There was an embarrassed silence – clearly no one had expected Master Evans to be a martinet. Meanwhile Phil was thinking: like hell I will! He'd not paid eighty quid to come and be shouted at, but how could he walk away and not in some way be letting Doctor Lin down.

"Master Evans also very rude," she observed, quietly. "No this will not do at all." And then. "Join line, Mr Markham, but take front. And remember Fa Jing."

"Fa Jing? But I can't take this guy – he's a Kung Fu nut and built like a brick... wall."

Doctor Lin patted him on the back which made him feel oddly confident. "Yes, but we have surprise on our side. Take line please."

Phil smiled politely at Master Evans, who was staring wide-eyed at this upstart's lack of respect. That was more of a Karate or a Judo

thing, Phil was thinking – respect to other grades, and absolute respect for the Master – not a Chinese thing at all, where any form of elitism was frowned upon. Doctor Lin did not command respect, she earned it effortlessly.

Dragon Man was wary of Phil's approach, but not sufficiently intimidated to insist he went to the back of the line. Politely, Phil squeezed in front of the skinny girl and braced himself against Master Evans' Popeye-esque forearms. "Sorry," said Phil. "When I get talking to the Doc... you know?"

"Yea, yea – just push."

Phil felt the skinny girl's hands on him – hardly any pressure at all, poor girl, and it allowed him a little space to lower himself. He tried to breathe deep, to feel the energy inside of him, coming up from his heels. Then with a half twist, he wound the energy up and, just as the Dragon Man was repeating the word "Push", Phil released it in a short sharp burst. He regretted closing his eyes because the Dragon Man was already picking himself up and dusting down his silk pyjamas by the time Phil opened them. And all he could do was stare at Doctor Lin, who praised him with a faint nod and an approving smile.

"So you do practice after all, Mr Markham. Is good for you. Yes?"

Phil was embarrassed now, and offered a hand to the Dragon Man. "Sorry mate, I thought you were ready."

The group was breaking up, chattering, unsure what the point of the exercise had been, unsure whose authority was to be accepted.

"I think we break for tea, now," said Doctor Lin and everyone followed her indoors. Phil watched as she took the Dragon Man to one side, defused his ego, had him smiling and nodding as she took charge, and the weekend was thus saved from disaster. Penny brought him tea, staring wide eyed at Phil and Phil felt himself swelling with foolish pride until he realised she was winding him up and then they both laughed.

"My hero," she said.

"And there's me thinking I'd won your heart with my show of superhuman strength."

"Don't be an ass. But it was fun seeing him taken down a peg."

Phil was aware of Blakedon hovering at his shoulder so he turned and offered his hand. "Philip Markham, and this is Penny Barnes. We're from Middleton. Call me Phil."

"Ah... em. Bert. Bert Blake. Have you... em... been doing this sort of thing long?"

"Seven or eight months. You?"

"Oh... I'm just a beginner."

Penny smiled, unable to believe the man was so dense he thought they wouldn't recognise him. "So are we," she said. "Good fun though,

eh Phil? Pity your wife couldn't come. She would have enjoyed it."

"Well, it's never been Sally's thing really. What about David?"

"Definitely not. Far too many pierced noses here for David. Actually I'm thinking of having one done. What do you think, Mr Blakedon?"

"Oh... em... well... it's Blake - Bert Blake... but anyway – that would look very pretty I'm sure."

Phil agreed. "Question is what would David say though?"

Penny shrugged. "Who cares? That's settled then. It's worth doing it just to see the look on his face."

Weren't they being dangerously indiscreet? Was Penny wise to poke fun at David like that in front of the man David had hired to spy on her?

"That skinny girl's, got a nice one. I'll go and have a word with her."

Phil turned to Blakedon. "So, Mr Blakedon..."

"Oh... Bert, please."

"What do you do for a living Bert?"

"Em... public relations... that sort of thing."

Phil nodded. "Tricky things aren't they, public relations? Often misunderstood. Impossible to know quite what's really going on... I mean between members of the public."

Phil imagined Blakedon had begun to sweat a little.

"Quite so, Mr Markham... I mean Phil. So, I noticed you and Mrs Barnes aren't staying in the dorms here?"

"Lord no, the Doc warned us about them ages ago. We're staying up at the Red Lion."

"Ah! I wasn't aware that was... permitted."

"Well, the Doc's the boss as far as I'm concerned, and she sort of insisted on it. Look, why don't you join us for dinner tonight?"

"Oh... I wouldn't want to intrude..."

"Nonsense, the Doc and I aren't... well... you know? Together in any way."

"I hadn't suppose for a moment you were, Phil."

"She's a good friend, and a good doctor – sorted my flaming ear out for sure. But there's nothing else going on at all."

"And Mrs Barnes?"

Ooh.... you're perhaps not so dense after all, Mr Blakedon.

"Well that's up to you, Bert, but she's married and loyal, and I don't think you'll get very far."

The detective blushed. "Well... no. That wasn't what I meant at all."

"It would be good to have another bloke at dinner. I felt a bit outnumbered last night."

"Well,... I suppose I could."

"Good man: The girls will be delighted."

CHAPTER 26

Doctor Lin sat quietly in the back of Phil's car while Penny stared at him from the passenger seat. "You did what?"

"I just thought it would make his job easier, that's all."

Doctor Lin laughed. "Strange game, Mr Markham."

"Doc, ever since you stopped sticking pins in me, I've been wanting you to call me Phil."

"Okay, Phil. My pleasure."

"So how can I call you? I rather like Doc – it suits you."

"Given name is Ping-Ping – but call me Doc if you wish."

Penny listened to all of this with a growing sense of bewilderment. Could neither of them grasp what Phil had done? "Are you insane, Phil?"

"While he's in our company, we have him under our control. We dictate the story he writes to our folks back home."

"I really don't care."

"But Pen..."

"I'm enjoying this chance to get away, Phil. We're both married with kids – surely you of all people would understand how rare these chances are. I was looking forward to a hot bath, and changing into a nice frock, then spending the evening with you both – you know, a nice meal and some adult conversation for a change? He'll just spoil it."

Phil grew quiet. Penny was right. "I'm sorry. I should have asked you first."

But who was she kidding? They were being followed – where was the freedom in that? She placed a hand on his shoulder as he drove, and smoothed the cloth of his jacket. Had Sally really let him out of the house wearing that old thing? "Perhaps you're right," she said. "It's better having him where we can see him. But, like I said, it seems to me someone's already decided what our story is. So maybe it's time we started writing one for ourselves."

They parted company with Doc Lin on the landing of the second floor. Phil was trying not to feel aroused at having Penny near him – just him and her, alone in a hotel. Instead he fixed his eyes on the carpet which seemed threadbare, and on the skirting boards which were badly chipped, and he was thinking he'd paid first class prices for something distinctly second rate. The bloke who'd served dinner last night had strutted about in his waistcoat looking like a high class restaurateur, but he'd had muck under his fingernails, the origins of which Phil hadn't wanted to speculate too much about.

"Phil?"

"Hmm... sorry, Pen. This is a terrible mess. But... look... there's no one I'd rather be in a mess with."

"Not even Sally?"

"That's just it, Sally and me – we are the mess."

"And we're not?"

"No. We've done nothing wrong. That particular mess is someone else's making."

"Yes, well... I've been thinking about that. Look, Phil. Will you give me half an hour, then come up to my room. I'd like to speak to you before dinner."

"Your *room*?"

She nodded.

"Perhaps we'd better not."

"Why?"

"Hotels always make me feel... horny."

She gave him a patient look. "Tie a knot in it, and come up to my room."

Phil waited the half hour, then climbed the stairs to Penny's room. He couldn't imagine what she wanted to say to him there that could not have been said on the landing. She was waiting for him, the door whispering open after the first gentle tap. It was a warm room, very small, like his own, with a similar view of the dustbins. She was wearing a long dressing gown of turquoise satin and definitely no bra. Her hair was brushed, her face made up – blusher and a dark lipstick... and the scent of... was that Poison?

God, how he loved Poison!

"Am I too soon? I can come back."

"It's okay – you're right on time. Look, Phil: will you do anything I ask you to?"

"Of course."

"Then take off your clothes."

"What?"

She produced a camera then set it down on the dressing table and switched it on. The lens shot out, quite long, he thought, and phallic in its urgency. Then she pointed it in the direction of the bed.

"We can only write our own story once we're free," she said. "So let's give them what they want."

"Pen?"

"They think we're at it, so let's give them the proof."

"But... we always said we'd never do this. This isn't us. I can't be with you this way... what was it you said once? It was something about honour and dignity. This... this is just... sordid. Also a bit weird."

"I'm not saying we actually do anything – just *look* like we're doing

it. And your face doesn't have to be in it – just your body. It doesn't have to be your story too if you don't want. But I think I want it to be mine."

"No, you don't."

"Yes I do. It's simple: you lie on the bed, I get on top of you. I take a picture with the timer – maybe a few pictures, then I give them to Blakedon at dinner tonight, and pay him a hundred pounds to say he took them."

Phil could see her hands trembling. He could also see a redness breaking out around her neck and he knew she didn't mean any of this, that she wasn't thinking straight and it worried him because he'd come to rely on her common sense; he possessed enough stupidity for them both. He sighed and sat down upon the bed.

"Don't let them win like this! Anyway, we still don't know who he's working for."

"It's obvious. It's David – and his mother. They were suddenly falling over themselves to persuade me to come here. It was like they were desperate to set me up, to give me the opportunity to do something... well... like this."

"But Sally was the same, after she'd had a chat with her father. It could just as easily be him. He's never forgiven me for marrying Sal, and he'd love it if she and I split. He's probably already got a replacement for me lined up"

Penny took a breath and sat beside him. The bed was useless and sank in the middle, so they slid together, and Phil took a firm hold of her shaking hands, pressing them both into her lap. She was looking at their reflection in the dressing table mirror, her in her seductive dressing gown – nipples sticking out like a blind cobbler's thumbs, and him in his mangy old jacket looking like a punter who couldn't afford the going rate.

No, Penny that's not fair! We look good together: me afraid, and him gentle, sympathetic... not pawing at your tits, and not falling over himself to get his dick out, even when you've just asked him to.

"That's it then," she said. "You might as well go. I could never be with a man like you."

"Eh?"

"You said you'd do anything... but you obviously lied."

He smiled. "That's me all over – do anything to get a woman into bed."

"So, you thought it was a stupid idea?"

"Yes... and you had the nerve to call me stupid when I asked for your mobile number."

"I did, didn't I."

They looked at the camera, and Phil imagined what it would have

been like, a naked Penny on top of him – even if it had not been for real. The feel of her, the look of her looking down at him, and the feel of himself naked under her.

"What is it?"

"Nothing... but I'd better go now."

"Okay... but I'm thinking I'd like the camera to contain one picture of us, you and me. Fully clothed if you like."

"It's tempting, but still not a good idea."

"Don't you see how it looks at us? Like it wants to begin recording a different story – for us."

Had she really meant to imply that there was such a thing as "us", that there was a "Phil and a Penny"? No. She was still upset, tired, and at a loss to make sense of the whole situation – she'd not meant any of it!

"You've got pictures of your kids on there Pen... maybe David too. Maybe of a picnic you had last year some time. Stuff you've forgotten about. Birthday parties... Christmas day! Summer holidays. If you flicked through them now, you'd begin remembering some of the good stuff."

"No. It's a blank card. I deleted everything. Have you seen how small those cards are these days? I thought I could keep it in a locket around my neck, or round my waist, tuck the locket in my pants... no one would know – David hasn't the slightest interest in what I keep in my pants any more."

"Pen, stop!"

"Fuck me, Phil!"

He rose to leave but she caught his hand. "Take your clothes off, and let me fuck you... no one will know!"

"Penny, you're being a very naughty girl now!"

She looked at him in disbelief, then laughed, and as she laughed the camera grew bored with the two of them and shut down in protest, pulling in its erection with a tired little whine. "I can't believe you just said that."

"There are a few things you've said just now I can't believe either. Listen, we don't need to play this their way. We don't need to give them evidence of infidelity. We can just go home on Sunday night and tell them we've had enough, and we're walking out, starting again – and not necessarily with each other."

She pressed his hand. "Oh, but that would make sense though wouldn't it, if we did walk out, I mean if we did make a start together? I mean it would be cheaper to share a place, than to live separately. We could be together... as friends."

This was nothing Phil had not fantasised about in the darker moments of his marriage this past year. "I don't want us to end up

like... me and Sally, or you and David. We've said all this before. Why is it any different now?"

"But we wouldn't be like that – and it's always been different between us."

"How can you know? Pretty soon you'd look at me and see a wrinkled old man and wonder what the hell you'd done."

"No... we'd always be friends first. Lovers second. We'd be housemates."

Phil couldn't believe what he was hearing and she made it all sound so plausible, but this was Penny: Penny who was not interested in an affair, Penny who wanted to repair her marriage. Was it the freedom? Was it the distance she'd put between her and her old life that had brought all this to the surface? He felt the same – it was hard to imagine Sally now, hard to imagine Marty and Ellie, hard even to imagine their voices, and he didn't care. He didn't miss them at all because he was here in this private room with this lovely, friendly woman who seemed to know him so well.

And her gown was slipping open.

"No," he said. "There may come a time, one day. When you and I are together in another room, like this. But I promise you, we shall never *fuck*... not for the madness of it, or from a desire to wipe out a painful past. If we ever undress for each other, it will be to make love."

CHAPTER 27

Dinner with Blakedon was actually a welcome distraction for Phil. He had never spoken so intensely to any woman before, never declared himself so openly, and his words had made a deep impression on Penny. He could see those words in her eyes, and so could Doctor Lin, who noted early on Penny's quiet air and faraway look – not so pugnacious as last night.

Blakedon had dressed smartly in a three piece suit, which puzzled Phil because it would have been the last thing he'd think to pack for a weekend Tai Chi retreat. He seemed genuinely interested in Doctor Lin and asked searching questions about the theory of traditional medicine. And apart from the fact that the man was lying through his teeth, claiming to be a PR consultant called Bert Blake and not an hilariously incompetent PI called Herbert Blakedon, Phil could almost perceive of circumstances where he might have liked the man.

Doc Lin found the situation very stimulating – the accused lovers at the same table as their potential nemesis. But whose side was she on? Well, Phil's of course. He'd impressed her that morning. She'd seen something of the energy growing in him, and had been fairly sure he could dent the Dragon Man's confidence, but to knock him over had been something of a bonus. It usually took students many years to develop to such a level. All right, it seemed Master Evans was a poseur and a fake, but he was still a big man!

"So, Bert, are you married?" asked Phil.

Blakedon took a moment, then gave a sad little smile. "I'm afraid my wife passed away some time ago. I am seeing someone, but one's never certain how to proceed in these matters."

"Ah..."

Penny who'd been very quiet thus far, spoke up. "I'm sorry. Have you children?"

"Yes. Both left home now – a boy and a girl. I do miss them."

Penny was wondering if she would miss her own children when the time came. Of course she would, wouldn't she? How could a mother not miss her own children? They were her blood and bone. It would be like losing an arm or a leg. "I'm so sorry," she said again. And then: "Actually, I think I'll go up. It's been a long day, and we've another early start tomorrow. Mr. Blakedon, I wonder if we could have a moment in the lounge."

"Em... it's Blake. But of course."

"Thank you, Mr Blakedon."

Phil glanced in Penny's direction, wondering what she was up to, but she deliberately avoided making eye contact with him. Then she

rose and Blakedon followed her out.

Doc Lin burned with curiosity, and was determined she should spend more time with Penny and Phil, for their company was never dull. "She called him Blakedon."

Phil nodded. "I hope that doesn't mean what I think it means."

Had Penny concealed other cameras in her room? Had she snapped them together on the bed perhaps, holding hands? Was that sufficient grounds for divorce? Was she now offering the evidence to Blakedon? He felt strange. He should have felt sick, he should have panicked and jumped up to stop her, but he didn't want to. It would be like stepping out onto an avalanche, he thought, but he was apparently willing to take the risk.

Doc Lin retired, and Phil waited in the bar for a while to see if Penny was in a mood for explanations. He could see her and Blakedon sitting in a pair of Chesterfields by the reception desk. Penny appeared to be doing all the talking while Blakedon nodded occasionally – his face set and stony. Whatever it was, was not good.

It was too expensive in the hotel to get drunk, so he found himself sipping timidly at a double malt, trying to make it last, afraid even of the fumes evaporating and spiriting away the contents of his glass. Penny finally joined him just as he was about to leave.

"So, buy me a drink and I'll tell you what I've done."

She'd told Blakedon she and Phil knew he was a private detective, that he'd been following them all over Middleton, that they didn't know who'd hired him and would he tell her? Blakedon, had mumbled something about professional confidence, so Penny had explained that if she or Phil ever saw him again, they would have the police on him, and she'd find out who'd hired him that way.

"He'll have to stop now," she explained. "And he'll have to tell whoever it is that we're onto them. That will either make things worse, or it'll all just go away. So, what do you think?"

He took a deep breath and gulped down the last of his whisky. "I think it's unlikely Blakedon will be at the retreat in the morning. It's also unlikely I will be either. I came here to relax – to go really deep into this Tai Chi business and instead we've ended up jumping headlong into even more manure, and none of it's our fault."

"I know, but maybe we can put it behind us now. Tomorrow will be better without him hanging about all the time. We'll get into it more tomorrow."

"Maybe."

"Please don't go home yet. See it through with me."

That she wanted him to stay was sufficient to persuade him, and the gentle urging he saw in her face warmed him. She wanted him, wanted him to stay. She reached out and quickly smoothed the back

of his hand as it lay on the bar. "It's Push Hands tomorrow," she said.

He brightened: "Well, why didn't you say so?" He smiled, and as he smiled there was a flash as Penny snapped him.

"I'm sorry, lover," she said, unhooking the locket from around her neck. "But I want you inside my pants tonight – metaphorically speaking."

Phil shook his head and slid down from the stool. "You're a very naughty girl, Pen. And we're going to get burned."

"You keep saying that, and I live in hope. But I'm beginning to think you're all talk. And Phil?"

"Hmn?"

"Good night."

They leaned together quite naturally, and brushed cheeks. Phil felt her lipstick smear as she kissed him lightly. "Good night, Pen. By the way, you know, you'll never get that locket around your waist."

She laughed and gave his arm a playful tap. "Bastard."

He retired feeling punch-drunk. It had been a spectacularly long day and he found it difficult to get his thoughts around any of it now, from his unexpected flooring of the Dragon Man, to Penny's almost deranged teenage antics that evening; it all seemed so unlikely to him that he climbed into bed secure in the knowledge none of it had been real and he could safely disregard it. Even the notion of his digitised self residing on a memory card in a locket around Penny's waist failed to either worry or arouse him.

He was confident she wouldn't go through with it, that she was simply teasing him. In the short time she'd been here, she'd lost twenty years of married life, twenty years of growing up and he felt he had glimpsed the girl she'd once been – energetic, impulsive, not always rational, and a little saucy too, in a lovely playful sort of way. Come Monday she'd be back at work all zipped up like a proper adult again, and with an emotional hangover that would take some guts to get through.

Meanwhile Penny sat on the edge of the bath and experimented with the locket. Phil was right – the blasted thing wouldn't go around her waist, it being about a foot too short. It wasn't something she wore much – too old fashioned nowadays, and there was always the risk that, having something like that around your neck, some nosey parker would ask to see inside of it – see what secrets she carried there: a picture of her husband, or her adorable children, perhaps? Or was it a memory card containing the single photo of a man who was not her lover, probably never would be, but who had spoken directly to her emotions as no other man ever had?

It had to be around her waist – she was quite obsessive now, in a way that only a bottle of wine could achieve. But even if she'd found a

chain big enough, what was to stop it from simply wriggling down and winding up scrunched up in the gusset of her trousers, or worse – round her ankles, when she wore a skirt? She found several slender pieces of leather cord at the bottom of her handbag – the remains of a necklace she'd once been fond of, and she managed to tie them together to form a loop that sat snugly around her waist. This fitted quite nicely, drawing up tight of its own accord and not to wanting to slip over her hips. The locket also fell against her mound in a way that suddenly excited her.

"Oooh!"

She was only feeling like this, she told herself, because she was away from home, bathed in the seductive ambience of an hotel, and slightly drunk. In the morning things would be very different. And tomorrow night she'd be back in Middleton, picking up the boys' socks and underpants from their bedroom floors – except Angela would already have been there, ordering and regimenting, perhaps even cleaning those stubborn little corners of the skirting boards in the kitchen that she could never be bothered with. She could hear her tut-tutting, scrubbing at the layers of Penny's neglect, revealing the ingrained evidence of her total inadequacy as a mother and a wife.

She closed her eyes and forced the thought to depart, to take with it also the sinking feeling and she slid naked into bed – except for the cord around her waist. Even sleeping nude was a rare pleasure, and the smooth, pressed sheets felt exquisite against her skin. It would have freaked David out, she thought, to have her naked in bed, something unspeakably immoral, and possibly unhygienic. The locket snuggled against her inner thigh, tempting her hand to come follow, and to reacquaint herself with other things she was in the habit of neglecting these days. She felt her arousal swelling quickly, and she turned gratefully onto her back, legs sliding apart, the locket descending like an eager ferret.

"Naughty boy, Phil!" she thought, then gave herself over to half an hour of quivering joy, while she surfed her memory, and lit up the corridors of a forgotten hunger.

When she came, she explored more slowly the moist well of her self before sliding the locket home, as she had known she would. And then she slept soundly, secure in the knowledge that in a small way at least she had this man –this wonderful man – exactly where she wanted him, and no one would ever know. Not even him.

He was not Gabriel. And he had told her he could never fuck her – that he could only ever make love to her, make love on *their* terms, without ever having to look over their shoulders. It was all impossible of course, and it would never happen, but it was something pure and noble, and it made it all the harder, she told herself, to avoid falling in

love with him.

CHAPTER 28

Phil returned to Middleton on Sunday night with a reluctance he'd not felt since those long summer school-holidays and having to face the agony of the first Monday back. Except, this was home he was returning to. After negotiating entry via the fiasco of the keys, he felt the silent resentment in Sally's every look. She didn't mention it, didn't even bother to enquire after his weekend.

"Kids been all right?" he ventured.

"Fine." Which he interpreted as: "A fat lot you care!"

He didn't pursue it. He sometimes got this treatment after a walk over the moors, but this was worse, he thought – much worse; something must have happened, a spat with Marty perhaps. The only thing to do was ignore it until she chose to bring it up herself. It was galling – she'd been perfectly fine about him going away, she'd said. Only now, it seemed, she wasn't. He ran a bath and soaked for a while, then retired to the cool of the conservatory, where she would find him if she wanted him. Ellie was watching Garfield in her room, while Marty was kicking the virtual shit out of an innocent passer by on his Game Station. All of this was familiar, but the weekend had made him see it all in a new light.

They'd finished off their time at the retreat with rather a long meditation. There'd been nothing airy fairy about it; the brain uses a vast amount of energy, the Doc had explained, so if you could find a way of shutting it down for a bit, it gave the rest of your body a breather too, plus the stillness brought its own benefits. It had taken him a while, maybe an hour but eventually, he'd managed to slip into an unusual state of mind that he imagined must have come somewhere near to what they were aiming at; and Penny, off to one side seemed to have managed it as well, for how else could anyone sit so still and for so long without fidgeting?

She'd seemed distant though, spending most of the day close to him, smiling but quiet, and he could only surmise she was embarrassed by the things she'd said, or was anxious about what Blakedon would do. And then in the late afternoon they'd parted company, like strangers. She'd not even said goodbye when he'd gone to her, just placed a hand upon his arm and patted it, absently, then turned her back and strode off to her Corsa.

Doc Lin had watched her go, too. "Think Penny enjoyed it?"

"I'm sure she did."

"Looks troubled, Philip, do you think?"

"She seems distant. It's all that business with Blakedon, yesterday."

He wondered how it would work out, if Penny would be able to

tell by their awkward looks and glances, who had hired him, or if she would ignore the whole thing in the hope that it would simply go away. He wished it would, for any fallout on Penny would risk dragging him into it as well, and he could protest all he liked to Sally but if the word private detective and affair was mentioned, he was in no doubt that plenty of mud would be sticking to him, and that it would be Sally, or perhaps more likely her father, gleefully, smearing him with it.

"Are you and Mum going to get divorced, Dad?"

"Eh?"

Marty had crept into the conservatory and was now sitting across from Phil, watching him.

"Divorced? What makes you think that?"

Marty shrugged. "Dunno. Only it happens, dunnit? Sometimes."

"Sure... but not to me and your mother." Was he sensitive to the vibes between them? Was he growing anxious? Phil hastened to reassure him, and was perhaps guilty of overdoing it. "You've no need to worry on that score. We'd never do that to you."

"Do what?"

"Well... split up. What's brought this on, Marty?"

Marty shrugged again. "I was just talking to Felix."

"Your mate at school?"

"Felix's parents split last year."

"They did? I'm sorry to hear that – sorry for Felix too, poor lad. Is he okay?"

"He's fine – says it's great."

"I'm sure he doesn't mean that."

"So... there's no chance of you and mum splitting up then?"

"I hope not."

"But before you said you never would."

"Well, okay, we never will. Marty what's going on?"

Marty looked a little crestfallen. Was Phil reading that right?

"Felix's dad bought him a Game Station 3."

Phil sensed something, like he was about to be conned out of something, and the mention of a Game Station 3 had him on high alert, because they were expensive. Yet to hear Marty talk every kid on the planet had one, except for him. "Well, Felix's dad must earn a lot more than I do," he replied, cautiously.

"It's 'cos his parents split. They feel guilty you see? So he's only to ask for stuff like that and he gets it."

"Ah!" Phil laughed. "So... let me see if I've got this right: You were wondering, that if Mum and I were going to split up, we'd hurry and get on with it, so you could sting us for a new Game Station?"

Marty cracked a smile, but Phil stared at him, barely able to

comprehend where his son was coming from. Marty might have been smiling, but he was only half joking.

"That's a bit mercenary, isn't it?"

There were warring parents all over the world, thinking they should stick together at all costs for the sake of their children, when actually their children wanted them to split because they saw it as a negotiating advantage in their mission to acquire even more stuff. Phil was horrified, and must have shown it.

"Chill out Dad. I didn't mean it!"

Phil had heard the phrase so many times: sticking together for the children. But was it fear of the pain you might inflict on your children that held you back from the brink, or was it fear of the pain you might inflict on yourself – the pain of being separated from your children? He looked at Marty – this grinning, good-looking lad, and wondered if he would miss him. Marty would be leaving them anyway in another four or five years time – Elspeth too shortly after, getting married to some cocky young pup of a lad that Phil was unlikely ever to approve of.

It was too late to go into this now, but it was a significant seed, and he was left wondering how it would grow inside of him. Later on, he heard Sally making preparations to go to bed, though it was only nine thirty, and Phil decided he'd turn in as well. When he padded quietly into the bedroom, he felt her resentment like shards of glass, flaying the skin off him, but there would be no talking it through tonight. He stripped gently, so as not to disturb her, and slid under the duvet. Was it possible to lie so close to someone, when things were so obviously wrong? Was it not like lying on a bed of pistachio shells? How could one even begin to sleep?

It was possible, but only by sinking inside of himself. Phil took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling himself slipping back in time to the dining room of the Red Lion hotel, to the company of Penny Barnes and Doc Lin. Then a voice came out of the darkness:

"Did you put the recycling out?"

Phil sighed. No, the recycling bins, filled with their painstakingly sorted crap lay in the bomb-site of his garage, and he was beggared if he was going to venture into there now.

"I'll do it in the morning," he said.

"You won't be up in time."

Phil would have replied, except he already knew the gist of this conversation.

"It doesn't matter, there's not much anyway, it'll do next time."

"But everyone else in the street's put theirs out."

"I've never missed the bin-men yet."

"But what if they're early?"

"They've never been early."

"I do everything else – the least you can do is put the recycling out!"

No, there was no need for this.

Phil fished his shorts up off the floor and pulled them back on. There was a full moon as he stepped outside in his carpet slippers. It was rather cold, but he couldn't be bothered dressing, and for a while he just stood there in the back garden with his goose-bumped flesh, staring up at the moon, wondering if this was the only life he'd got. He hoped not; this one was probably three-quarters done now, and he'd still not worked out how to enjoy it.

"So what do you reckon, mate?" he asked of the stone Buddha.

The Buddha smiled serenely back at him in the liquid moonlight, and Phil wondered how Penny was feeling.

After dragging the bins out to the bottom of the drive, he shuffled back inside, shivering now, to find Sally sitting at the breakfast bar in her dressing gown. It looked like they were going to talk, so he flicked the kettle on and dragged a couple of mugs from the cupboard, nearly dropping one when Sally asked:

"Who's Penny Barnes?"

He felt suddenly at a disadvantage, and slightly ridiculous, in his underwear and slippers, while Sally was sitting there all wrapped up. He was also confused. One minute he'd been grumbling about the recycling, and the next he was facing his wife, and she was firing the name of a woman at him, which meant only one thing of course. Or did it? Did it mean Sally was the one who'd hired Blakedon after all? Had Blakedon spilled everything? Had he lied to Sally, making up stories about Phil and Penny? All of this ran through his head but none of it added up.

"Well... there's a woman called Penny Barnes at the Tai Chi class. Why?"

"Who is she, Phil?"

"I just told you... she's a woman I know at the..."

"And was she there this weekend?"

"At the retreat? Yes."

"Just the two of you was it?"

"Well... Doc Lin was the only other person I knew, the others were all strangers, except for this weird little guy called Bert Blakedon."

"No one else went? Just you and her?"

"And the Doc, yes... and about thirty other people, mostly strangers. What's this about Sally?"

She had a bill in her hand from the Red Lion. Phil could tell how serious this was because she must have been through his jacket pockets, a thing she'd never done before. "It says here you booked a

double room."

Phil had kept quiet about the hotel for the simple reason that it was rather expensive and he knew Sally would have had a fit.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"So you admit it?"

"Admit what?"

"Don't play games with me, Phil. Did you share a room with Penny Barnes?"

He took a breath, let it out slow to calm himself, to lend emphasis. "No!... if you read on you'll notice I paid a supplement because I was on my own, staying in a double room. There were no singles left. All right, Penny and Doc Lin were in the same hotel, and we had dinner together, but you're not suggesting I had both of them in my bed, are you?"

Sally was quiet for a moment and Phil was tempted to think he'd got away with it when she slid a piece of pink notepaper towards him. "I found this in that Tai Chi DVD of yours."

At first he couldn't make it out. There was a heart shape in the centre of the paper and written in spirals around it was a repeated mantra, a name, written over and over: Penny Barnes, Penny Barnes, Penny Barnes,... until the paper was filled with it.

"I was tidying up when I found it."

Phil was too puzzled by it to see the dangerous look in Sally's eyes. "This was inside my Tai Chi DVD?"

"Are you denying you put it there?"

The word "deny" seemed a bit strong. It was a mystery for sure, and obviously he hadn't put it there, but to have to denied it implied he was required in some way or other to defend himself. "I didn't put it there, no."

"You wrote it though."

"That's hardly my handwriting, Sal. No I didn't write it. This, this is childish... it's the sort of thing a teenager does when they have a crush on someone. I don't get it..."

Could that have been it? Could Marty have had a crush on someone called, coincidentally, Penny Barnes and hid this in Phil's Tai Chi DVD case? No, that sounded preposterous. Then he thought back to the peculiar conversation he'd had with Marty – was this the boy's idea of somehow twisting a new Game Station out of them, by setting Phil up as a philanderer? It seemed a bit extreme, and Marty didn't know Penny's name – it existed only in Phil's encrypted diary. Had Marty cracked the password? But how could he? And anyway the diary was on an MP3 player that never left Phil's possession.

He began to feel guilty – even though he'd nothing to feel guilty about, and yet there was this bit of note-paper with Penny's name all

over it. He sat down. How was this even possible? He laughed – a mixture of amazement, dismay, and disbelief. Was he dreaming this? Sally was about to speak again but he cut her off.

"Look, if you think I'm having an affair then fine, there's nothing I can do about that. As for the truth, if you're interested, there's nothing going on between me and Penny Barnes. For pity's sake Sal, I've barely time to brush my teeth these days. When would I have the time to entertain a... a mistress?"

"Then how else do you explain it?"

Emmeline Parker!

It hit him like a thunderbolt. It was the only rational explanation, but that meant Trevor had put her up to it. Which meant Trevor had hired Blakedon! He'd hired him to find evidence of an affair, and in the absence of it, he'd decided to make something up. It was preposterous of course – impossible! Trevor wouldn't do a thing like that surely? He wouldn't deliberately hurt his own daughter and grandchildren?

"Listen, Sal... did your Dad ask if he could borrow my Tai Chi DVD while I was away, by any chance?"

Sally looked confused for a moment.

So Trevor had asked*!*

Actually Sally, I'm quite interested in it and I wouldn't mind having a look,... while Phil's away,... do you think you could dig that DVD out for me?....

Phil nodded, a strange, perverted kind of understanding beginning to dawn. Sally would have opened it to check the DVD was inside, and found the note Emmeline had already secreted there.

"But what does this mean Sal?"

He was asking this of himself, and the answer seemed no less preposterous for having asked it out loud, that Trevor wanted Sally to think her husband was having an affair, and Penny was a plausible target. He looked at Sally and read the simmering anger there. It didn't look hopeful, but what was worse, he suspected he no longer had the energy to argue his innocence. He groaned.

"Oh,... this is bad."

Penny had said it herself. *It was as if their families had wanted them to be having an affair, that they could conceive of no other story.*

"Do you want me to be having an affair, Sal?"

Sally looked at him contemptuously. He'd never seen her look at him quite like that before and he knew they'd entered upon unfamiliar territory. Trevor, the insufferable bastard, had fired a broadside and sunk Phil's leaky old tub in one.

"I don't know what I want from you any more," she said, coldly. "I thought you'd have the decency to admit it, but if you won't even do

that, there's nothing else to say."

"I'll leave tonight then."

It was not a question. He was not asking her if she wanted him to leave. He'd already decided he would do it, and was in the fortunate position of at least having somewhere else to go. What surprised him though was how simple and how painless a thing it was. He had often wondered about the possibility of this moment, but shrunk back from it in horror.

"I'll just get dressed, eh? I'll try not to wake the kids. I'll come back tomorrow for some more stuff, while they're at school."

Yes. This seemed reasonable. Practical. He was still looking at the note, still puzzled by it. But Sally. Poor Sally. She was icy calm. Phil surmised it was just the shock – she wasn't really that cold. Was she?

"Are you going to her?" she asked.

"Eh? Oh... I'll stay at Richie's for a bit. Really Sal, I'm sure Penny will be as surprised by the news of our affair as I am."

She sneered back: "You mean surprised you were found out."

Phil looked at her. Would she be okay? Had she everything she needed?

"Call me at Rick's if there's anything you want, okay?"

He went into the bedroom to pull his clothes on, then packed a hasty bag with his work suit and a few shirts. Marty was right, he thought, as he sank later on, into the cold quiet of his car. A few hours ago there was no way he'd be forking out three hundred quid on a new Game Station! But now... well, now the lad could have anything he wanted if it would make up for even a fraction of what he would be feeling when he woke up in the morning.

To find his father gone.

CHAPTER 29

Richie nudged Phil back into consciousness at seven with a cup of tea, and an expression that managed to convey both sympathy and an air of "I told you so".

"Don't"

"What?"

"Look at me like that! I can't believe this is happening to me!"

"Have you still got that note?"

"I left it at home."

"Pity. It would have had Nosy Parker's fingerprints all over it. How would Sally have explained that?"

"Fingerprints? Oh, come on Richie. You watch too much television."

"I've not got a television, remember?"

Phil managed to take some comfort from Richie's gentle banter. That's how they'd been as boys: Richie winding him up and Phil too blind, too egotistical to take it any other way but personally, and eventually snapping at him, but he was older now and Richie's banter was like a welcome home, while Phil's ego had all but dissolved into the overwhelming sea of his life.

"The worst part, Richie... the worst fucking part... is that I used to feel sorry for him."

"Who?"

"Trevor. I used to think well, okay, he's a bit annoying and he interferes all the time, but his wife left him, and he's a human being for Christ's sakes with,... feelings. And then he pulls a stunt like this... like lobbing a hand grenade into the middle of our lives and blowing twenty years apart with no more feeling than foreclosing on a... on a... fucking loan!"

"Steady... you've already exceeded your quota for the "F" word today. We'll sort it out."

"I doubt it."

Richie shrugged and glanced at the pocket watch, then gave it a thoughtful wind. "Depends if you want to or not."

"Of course I want to... but... am I okay staying here for a bit?"

"You know better than to ask. Bring Penny round if you want but you've got to promise to keep the bedroom noises down. I've got my reputation to think of."

"That's not even funny."

"Sorry. Anyway, you'd better get out of bed, or you'll be late for work."

Meanwhile Trevor was taking the news of his unqualified success

with far less enthusiasm than he thought he might have done, true he was just coming up to the vinegar stroke, Emmeline having faked orgasm a few moments earlier, when the call came and it was Sally, asking if he'd come round right away to help her get the kids ready for school.

"Slow down girl. What's happened? You confronted him with it? But was that wise? And he's done what?"

Emmeline sat up and adjusted her night-dress. Something about the conversation made her feel uncomfortable – not so much the fact she'd been a willing accomplice in torpedoing a marriage, but that some of the survivors might now be swimming her way. Couldn't the stupid girl manage on her own? What good was it, Trevor scurrying round after her all the time?

Trevor hung up after making urgent promises to be there in no time at all. And now he sat, gawking at the carpet, while Emmeline went to make coffee. It had seemed almost nothing – a trivial thing... like a practical joke. He'd advised Sally not to confront Phil, when she'd broken news of her discovery to him on Saturday morning. He'd told her that it was probably nothing. He'd imagined the hard time Phil would get from Sal: the silent treatment, the sulks... and it amused him to think of Phil's confusion, not knowing what the devil he'd done. But he'd definitely told her not to confront him! Why couldn't people just do as they were told? If they'd only do as he told them, everything would be all right.

But this! No, he wasn't ready for this yet. He'd only gone as far as making tentative plans, imagining their slow drift apart, imagining who among his younger acquaintances might have been interested in taking on his daughter – *marriage is a bit rocky just now. Rumour is her useless husband's been playing away, you know?*

It was cold in the orchard, and there was barely enough light to see, but Phil was right in assuming he'd be alone, and the Tai Chi moves afforded him some further consolation. It seemed your whole life could fall apart, but so long as you could keep the form flowing – it would still reward you with that odd feeling of something or other, something unseen and indefinable supporting this bleeding bag of bones that was his life. It was important no one else was there, not Lara, and especially not Penny, because he needed sympathy and he would not have resisted the urge to pour it all out, and that would have been the most dangerous thing, because no one could know that he and Sally had split up. Because they hadn't. It was ridiculous.

They were just living apart for a bit, that's all.

And then there was Penny: she'd acted strangely those few days over the weekend: one minute girlishly flirty and the next dangerously rebellious. It worried him how she'd take it if she knew his wife had

kicked him out. Worst case: it might have put her up to walking out on her own marriage out of sympathy for him, and he couldn't let that happen. She'd been close to doing something silly over that photograph, blowing her marriage apart on purpose, like cutting off her nose to spite her face. But it was enough one life was in ruins over this, and not two. And as he moved he began to sum up what his own marriage had meant to him by the measure of its potential loss.

It was clearer now.

It was becoming the hardest thing in the world, just to be human, to love and be loved and be married, and bring children into the world, to see them grow... and let them go. There were so many children in the world. They whined a lot and wanted stuff, and sometimes the adults became confused over just who was in charge, but Phil's marriage was an important thing, and he had achieved something by it.

In half an hour he'd be sitting down in the dull factory where he'd spent the last thirty years of his life. That was okay – he was philosophical about that. But he would still have hated to think of himself in years to come looking back and seeing it as the only measure of his life. It was easy to take your marriage for granted, easy to blind yourself to the fact that for all its wrinkles, it was still the most important thing a man could achieve: to see it through, to see his children grown and flown, and either to die in the arms of his wife, or to see her through to the end. What type of car you drove, or how many bathrooms your house possessed were really neither here nor there. Yet to so many who waked the earth these days, they were everything.

It was an important day, then: it was the day he'd managed to screw it all up! Or was it more simply something that had been coming for a long time, something he'd been nimble enough to keep dodging, until now.

He stopped mid-form as the realisation hit him. Then he rang Scrotum, said he was sick and needed to take some time. Without even waiting for Scrotum's reply, he ended the call, and slipped straight back into the form. He repeated it slowly, recommencing smoothly straight after the closing moves, time after time, just him alone, in the orchard. He had slowed right down, taken the form deep into the soul of him, hanging the changes onto the rhythm of his breath, and his breaths were long and slow and deep. The oxygen filled his blood, surged around his body and his brain. Then the increased levels of serotonin began to subtly alter his consciousness. It was like becoming drunk on it – a peculiar feeling where one could see the patterns underlying the cosmos in the trivial and the everyday. The trees had turned golden, and the air was damp, Phil's breath

mingling with mist of the morning, and he willed the mist, like the feel of the moves, to dissolve him.

Lara eased herself from bed around nine and crossed to the window in order to draw the curtains. Now the leaves had started to thin, it was possible to see a little way into the orchard and she could tell there was someone there. She knew it was Phil by the way he moved – the energy animated him in a distinctive way, sometimes slow, sometimes fast, and she often had problems following him in class. He was difficult to read, difficult to predict.

He was already late for work, and she wondered about going down to make sure he'd not simply forgotten – he sometimes had the far away eyes of a scatterbrain. She decided to leave it though, for now. But he was still there when she looked again around lunch time and she knew there was something wrong.

A cup of tea was probably in order.

She found him moving, trance like – his form had lost its angularity, and had instead a soft fluidity she found beautiful to watch. He had lost his spiky outbursts, his tendency to stick a jerky release into the moves at every opportunity. He was keeping all the energy to himself, turning it inside and releasing only sufficient to maintain his movements. He was a picture of perpetual motion. She did not like to disturb him, but it was beyond her how anyone could keep this up for three hours and not be hurting themselves.

"Philip?"

He let out a surprised grunt, and like a thing finely balanced, thrown suddenly off balance, he came to a jarring halt. And then, like a marionette who's strings had suddenly been cut, he sank awkwardly to his knees, head drooping. "I'm sorry Lara," he said, as she rushed to him.

"Philip dear, are you all right?"

"I feel a little weird... but I think I'm all right."

"You've been here for hours."

"I have?"

"Aren't you cold. You'd better come in."

"No, no. I didn't mean to intrude. I just got a bit carried away."

When she looked at him she felt herself drawn back in time forty years, to her children's little illnesses – the mysterious tummy aches, the sicknesses that came on a particular night of the week. After a while you could tell the difference between truth and sham. This was slightly different of course – Phil would complain of nothing -–even if someone had run him through with a red-hot poker, he would have covered up his grimaces and tried not to make a fuss. But that only made it easier to tell something dreadful had happened and, not knowing much else about him, she could only jump to the conclusion

that Penny Barnes was at the bottom of it.

"My wife's kicked me out," he said, unable to quite believe he was in the position to use such a stock phrase. "She thinks Penny and I are having an affair."

Lara hid her dismay, then swallowed back her natural urge to say she'd told him so. "But... whatever gave her that idea? You've not been... indiscreet, have you?"

"Oh, only a little. I wrote her name endlessly on a piece of pink note-paper, wrote it in a spiral round a love-heart. Was that indiscreet? I suppose it was. I've only myself to blame, really. It was very stupid of me. I was just asking for it, wasn't I?"

This didn't sound right at all to Lara, given what Phil had already told her about the peculiar nature of his relationship with Penny.

"Come and have some tea," she said. "I was persuaded by Doctor Lin to buy it. You must try some – I swear it's psychotropic! If the authorities ever catch on, they're sure to make it illegal."

"Then we'd better enjoy it while we can I suppose."

"That's the spirit."

It was a tea that cleared the head, and Lara made a very strong brew of it while settling Phil down in her living room. It was like his grandmother's house, he thought – a lifetime of old things, old photographs and furniture, solid and comforting, a comforting nostalgia that put him in a peculiar frame of mind.

Three hours of Tai Chi had exhausted him but it had also snapped him out of his slide into self pity. His life had taken on a new perspective, literally overnight, but these were the circumstances he'd been presented with and he thought he'd better get used to them. Perversely, he longed for the familiar whistling in his ear, but it seemed even the tinnitus was something he could no longer rely upon.

It was a different Phil who took the murky brew from Lara's slender hands, a stronger Phil who settled back into paisley patterned cushions, under the twinkling eye of a Lara who had begun to remind him of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple.

If only she could solve this one, he thought.

He began to talk. And as Lara listened she grew sadder by the minute. She had no reason to doubt anything he'd told her. He and Penny had formed an innocent friendship, one that had perhaps been deliberately misconstrued by vindictive busy bodies who were so unaware of their own shortcomings, they saw no harm in obsessively moulding the world into an image of their own stupidity.

"It all sounds so far-fetched," he said. "I mean this love-heart thing, but it's the only conclusion I can draw."

"Have you spoken to Trevor?"

"I'm not sure I can trust myself to remain civil."

"But you're not the angry type, Philip."

"I know. I'd just end up feeling frustrated, stuck for words, and he'd run rings around me. To be honest I just want to pretend he doesn't exist any more, and I can only do that if I don't see him."

"But if he was responsible, then he shouldn't be allowed to get away with it. It's not just you who's been damaged by this. It's your wife and your children. And it all seems so... so... silly!"

"I know, but the damage is done. And Sally will always take his side."

"Even when he's wrong, like this?"

"Well, put it this way. If I was wrong, and he was wrong, both of us at the same time, she'd forgive him first."

"Philip, really! I'm sure that's not true."

"I think it is."

"But you've done nothing... and Sally must be made to see that."

"Have I done nothing? I might have thought of Penny, thought of her fondly and wondered: what if things had been different, you know?" He shook his head. "Is that wrong? Does that make me guilty? I didn't write that childish note, but is there sufficient tender feeling the note might have been telling the truth anyway?"

Lara thought for a moment. "No. Don’t be silly, dear. If we could be judged by our thoughts, then we’d all be in trouble."

"Silly? Yes... perhaps. But if my marriage had been stronger, Lara, Sally would have looked at that note and known straight away it wasn't true, that someone was playing games. It seems you can go for years, telling yourself it's okay, that you have a successful life, a successful marriage, when all along you're just sleepwalking, fantasising, fooling yourself. And then something happens, something small and silly, and it blows everything away."

Phil still felt odd, his head light yet somehow very clear. "Lara,... please don't tell Penny about any of this."

Lara nodded. That was exactly what she'd hoped he would say.

CHAPTER 30

At first, Phil found he did not miss his family. He tried to miss them, but those early days of his estrangement were more like decompressing into the vacuum of zero responsibility. He would miss them, eventually, of course, miss them dreadfully, once the shock of it wore off, but for now there was only work, followed by what he came to call the quiet time.

He did not pause to consider that his adult life had been wasted, that he might as well have catapulted himself back twenty years for all he had to show now for his labours. His fifties were looming, but he dared not look them squarely in the eye... not yet. Nor did he allow himself to dwell upon the fact that from now on he would be just another guy who'd failed to hold it together. His future was as a weekend father, if he was lucky, and a purchaser of frozen meals for one.

What's the question of the week, Elspeth?

How the hell do I work my way through this one?

He did not return to the orchard for fear of bumping into Penny. He also avoided the class for a few weeks. Richie's garden consisted mainly of decking and minimalist planting. It was enclosed by tall bamboo and formed a private and tranquil place for practice. At first Phil was self conscious in case his brother began taking the piss, but one evening, under the deck lights, after watching Phil for a while, Richie began to join in.

"I've not corrupted you have I?" said Phil.

"I'm not a total Philistine. Show me how you did that one again?"

"Like this... watch."

Sally would get in touch. Any day now, she'd ring, or she'd turn up with a squeal of tyres and dump the kids on him. At least that's what he thought, but time passed, and it began to feel as if Phil's former life had ceased to be. He did not go home for more stuff, as he'd told Sally he would, but went out and bought fresh shirts, underwear and socks as and when he needed them. His personal writings were on his MP3 player, and he'd had the presence of mind to bring his laptop with him. He did miss the Internet though, the information that was on tap, the ability to know what anything was in a couple of mouse-clicks. Richie had yet to capitulate to the world wide web.

Still, he was puzzled by the fact he did not want to go home for more things, and it eventually dawned on him their value was far outweighed by the fear of returning. But fear of what? Making things worse, or making them suddenly better? So it was a minimalist Phil, a monk-like Phil, with few possessions and no attachments who found

pleasure in the simplest of things, like a long soak in the bath, and the sound of a house breathing without the pollution pouring from a TV set, or a Game Station.

Some time during the second week, he visited the barber, a trendy youth with ripped jeans and bleached blonde hair pulled severely over his eyes. There wasn't much Phil could do with his hair – it had begun to recede in the general pattern for many men of his age, and for years he'd told the lad just to tidy it up as best he could, but on this occasion he looked at himself in the mirror, and at the reflection of the lad hovering, ready with comb and scissors and he said: "What would you do with it?"

And the lad nodded, as if he'd been waiting for this moment, waiting years to tell Phil what he needed. "A number one, mate."

Phil had been expecting that and winced. "A bit severe perhaps?"

"No, no... just try it. You can always grow it back."

Phil sighed. "Okay, a number one it is. Go for it."

With a nod, the lad set down his scissors and picked up his clippers.

Richie did a double take when Phil returned. "You're not going all mid-life on me are you? Did you get tattoos as well, while you were at it?"

Phil was feeling light headed and sufficiently different in himself for it to have been worth the risk. He smiled, then wondered if Penny had ever gone through with her nose-piercing. Penny! Damn it! Why did he have to think of Penny? He'd not seen her since the retreat, and the time was weighing on him. See? He was guilty after all! He could have written that note. He wanted to see her, talk to her. And if Penny had told him to go and see Sally and put it right... then he assured himself he would have done so.

Of course none of this was real. He was existing in a parallel reality where his most outrageous thoughts had become concrete fact, because the concrete fact of his life had given a heave and pitched him off into a state of complete sensory deprivation. He wondered about going out to look for her. Who? Penny of course – stumble into her accidentally at the supermarket perhaps. But he knew the rules: she would have changed jobs the day before. Except, she was not Caroline and therefore her presence in his life, or lack thereof, might not have been dictated by the normal rules at all. If he wasn't looking for her she would appear with ridiculous regularity – but if went looking: well, he'd never done that before, and he had to remind himself why.

Penny had her nose pierced the first Saturday she could slip away. She'd picked out a small stud in cubic zirconia and a more ostentatious ring of nine carat gold. She didn't want to push the boat

out just yet, in case she hated it. She'd had the piercing done in a tattoo parlour in the seedy back end of town. It had a down and dirty look about it, and she'd felt nervous waiting her turn in her nice clean uniform, sitting beside a couple of grungy girls and a greasy bruiser of a boy, all of whom had more piercings than she could count. She wondered where on earth they had room for more.

The process was not entirely painless and she felt a little sick as she walked home, felt also like she had an enormous sparkling zit on her nose. But she gritted her teeth because whatever David said, she was determined to keep it. It was a statement of her independence, her defiance, though of course had she not been so insecure about herself in the first place, she would not have needed to make a statement about it anyway.

David was predictably horrified, his mouth falling open, his eyes popping.

She feigned surprised. "What?"

"What have you done?"

She dabbed at her nose gingerly with a piece of tissue. "Is it still bleeding? I thought it had stopped."

"Take it out before the boys see you."

"I can't. It'll heal up."

He took a breath, then turned his head in a particular way, and Penny suddenly had it in her mind that he was going to call her a stupid woman. It was a peculiar intuition married couples sometimes have, brought about by reading body language and other subtle clues over the years. It was not that he'd ever called her a stupid woman before, but she felt sure he was going to do it now, and if he did, then Penny was going to really shout at him. And as she had read his mind, he also read hers, read the flicker in her eyes that could only be interpreted as: "Back off." So he caught his words, then sighed and shook his head. Then he remembered it was Sunday tomorrow and he wondered what his mother would have to say about Penny's ‘adornment’. But worse than that, he wondered what the vicar would say – the vicar he'd invited to lunch, but hadn't got around to telling Penny about yet.

It was now two weeks since the retreat. Penny had not seen Herbert Blakedon, and nothing in David's manner suggested he knew anything about it. So, David had *not* hired Blakedon then, which left Angela, and Angela had been noticeably frugal with her company of late, but Sunday would tell. Penny had decided that if anyone mentioned the retreat, she would say that it had been spoiled by Blakedon's presence. And who might have hired him I wonder? Would Angela have the poker face and the brass neck to sit that one through without betraying herself?

That night she checked her underwear drawer like Phil had taught her. The little piece of matchstick was on the carpet, so she knew someone had been rooting in it. David was unlikely to have been interested in the underwear, so it was the Buddhist stuff she kept in there that he was keeping an eye on. This had been going on for ages now and it angered her more and more. What was he afraid of? That she might corrupt the boys? What the boys believed was their business, not Penny's, and not David's either. Allegiance to David's religion seemed to be demanded at the barrel of a gun, and she did not want that for herself. She also trusted the boys had sufficient common sense not to want it either, but it was going to cause a lot of trouble eventually. For now the boys were still wrapped in the day to day care of their parents, but soon would come college, then university and the wide world of independence. They would disappoint David if they did not both become smart suited Bible bashing business men, and they would disappoint her if they did. She only prayed they would not embrace some hedonistic nightmare of a life instead, just to spite the both of them.

On Sunday, it was announced at the very last minute that Frank's stomach forbade him from attending lunch. David then mentioned he'd asked a friend round after church, to take Frank's place. Penny made no objection, and only wondered who David's friend might be, because to her knowledge David had no friends at the church, or at work, only rivals – at least in his eyes. The friend arrived late, as Penny was dishing up. The lateness was on account of the friend having been given the wrong time by Angela, or rather the correct time so far as the day's machinations were concerned – which meant less time for Penny to evade the plot.

The Reverend Starkey was a dark haired, dark eyed man in his middle thirties. He had doctorates in divinity, philosophy, and psychology. He was an Oxford man, with refined manners and a plummy accent, a studious air and a serious countenance. He was also rumoured to be a member of several influential Masonic Lodges. Penny did not dislike him – she just wondered what the hell a man like that was doing in Middleton.

She sighed as the full extent of the trap was revealed, though she could tell by the startled look in his eye that Reverend Starkey was not exactly a willing participant. She'd always known from her few attendances at church that the poor man was hopeless with large groups of people, also powerless to prevent himself from being manipulated. All of this was very bad, she thought, but he had brought flowers so she found it easier to forgive him.

"Penny, this is a magnificent lunch!" he said and then, turning to the others. "You're very lucky to have one so capable among you."

Don't go too far in your flattery, Vicar, she was thinking, but he sounded sincere and she allowed herself a smile. It was rare to be appreciated. Usually two hours of preparation, and perfect timing, was consumed with no more grace than feeding time at the zoo – the only sounds of satisfaction being a sort of grunting, reminiscent of piglets around a trough of swill. Except for Frank. Frank was a gentleman and always thanked her, though softly, so as not to attract Angela's attention.

Penny felt slightly ridiculous now, sitting opposite the Vicar, who, once you saw past his dog collar, was rather a handsome young man. Unfortunately she'd gone out of her way to look as outrageous as possible – the gold ring in her nose and the loud clothes were more fitting for a teenager: yellow and black striped tights under a long pink tee shirt emblazoned with the caption: "Forget love, I'd rather fall in chocolate." She'd also spiked her hair using some of Adam's gel - a substance David had forbidden him to use.

Looking at herself in the mirror, before lunch she'd looked like an eighties rock chick, but that was fine because the target had been the pomposity of her husband and his mother. They would have had a fit about the amount of money she was spending on matching bras and pants these days, to say nothing of the chain around her waist, and the locket she was now in the habit of tucking down the front of her pants - matching lilac today. She imagined Phil would somehow approve of this, would appreciate the prettiness she wore closest to her skin.

But to be suddenly sitting in front of the vicar was not something she'd expected, and her appearance, she reflected, was not something he deserved – no matter what he was going to say to her later on.

David and Angela could not have made matters more obvious than when they scuttled into the kitchen and began the washing up. Penny felt like she'd been set up on a date, and from the vicar's blushes she suspected he felt the same.

"More tea, Vicar?" she heard her self say, then stifled her amusement as she remembered the old joke.

"No... but thanks anyway."

"Some wine then?" she suggested.

The vicar's eyes lit up. "Oh? Wine would be lovely."

Nervous too, she thought – poor man. Well, she'd make it easy for him. "Shall we go through into the conservatory?"

"Yes... yes. Thank you, Penny."

There was a long silence as they settled into the wicker furniture, then Penny smiled. "I'm sorry, Vicar. I didn't know you were coming. David just said a friend. I hope everything was all right for you."

"Please... call me Andrew."

Andrew was it? But what's that look in your eye now, Andrew? Are

you worried about having someone like David call you a friend? I thought you'd be flattered. She liked the way he sipped his wine – slow, thoughtful, contemplative. He had excellent manners – very old fashioned, the sort of manners schools seemed to knock out of children at an early age these days, to replace them with insolence.

"This is lovely," he said. "Chardonnay, is it?"

"Yes... not that I'm an expert."

"Oh, me neither I'm afraid, but I am rather fond of wine – oh and a nice brandy." He smiled. "Though not at the same time, of course."

He's showing me how human he is, she thought. He'll be telling me he smokes a pipe next and bets on the horses!

"Penny." He lowered his voice. "Actually... David asked me to come. He's concerned about your... spiritual interests... your *reading*. Apparently."

Penny said nothing. Andrew had had all the help she was going to give him. Her intention had been to get him to the point as swiftly as possible, or it might have taken all afternoon. But now, here they were and he was on his own.

"My reading, Andrew?"

"For some reason it worries him," he said. "And as one of my parishioners that has to concern me. I said I'd speak to you in order to put him at ease."

Penny was determined to relax, to smile politely, to hear the man out, then show him the door. But in relaxing she somehow managed to look like she was hardening, her lips tightening, her face becoming stony. Andrew was alarmed. "Please don't misunderstand," he said. "It's not you I'm worried about, well not directly."

"Oh?"

"Is everything all right between you and David?"

Now this was something she'd not expected. "Not really, Andrew. If he'd leave things alone we'd be able to rub along quite nicely and see the children grown. But things have to be perfect, you see? And it's a peculiar image of perfection."

She wasn't sure if she'd gone too far and perhaps embarrassed him now, but the words slipped out, apparently ready formed and when she ran them back through her mind she was rather pleased with the way they'd summed everything up.

He thought for a long time, thought on what she'd said, and she admired him for appearing to take her seriously. "Yes,... it's hard to be ourselves among others, especially among those who would like to mould us into a shape that is against our nature."

She sighed. Intuitive as well as good looking! "So, you've come to burn my books, and lecture me on how Tai Chi is the work of the Devil?"

"I know that's what you thought... but really, Penny, we live in a more enlightened world, surely?"

"Do we? I would hardly describe the world I live in as enlightened. Is it not your job to convert me?"

He leaned back, the wine relaxing him now. "I can't speak for other men of the cloth of course. I see my job more as encouraging a spiritual outlook. I think that's the best one can do these days, and that alone can be the work of a lifetime. You're clearly interested in exploring such matters, albeit from a different perspective. Is it you I should be worried about then? Or is it those whose interpretation of religion is so narrow as to have squeezed out anything even remotely spiritual?"

Penny raised her eyebrows. Was he actually talking about David? Good looking, intuitive, and surprising! She gave him a cheeky smile: "You should be ashamed of yourself, talking like that. You sound more like a philosopher or a psychologist, than a vicar."

"Actually, my first loves were philosophy and psychology. My divinity studies grew out them."

"And the vicaring?"

"Well... like so much else in life, the vicaring was more of an accident than the result of a life's ambition. Oh... it seems very much my calling now but I've read a lot of books that perhaps a vicar shouldn't, and I'm very fond of Buddhism myself you know – though I find I can't go along with some of the more religious aspects. Actually, I have a few books at home I could lend you if you're interested – or we could discuss it. It depends how serious you are."

Was he trying to be crafty here? Was he trying to draw her out into speaking openly, then he could demolish her with his Oxford intellect?

"You're joking of course."

"Not at all, Penny. Really! It's admirable you take an interest in these matters. I've spent some time in China, you know? Lots of Chinese are Christians, also Moslem – but they practice Buddhism as well and see no conflict at all. For myself the only problem I have is the idea of retributive Karma – that we might find ourselves in a miserable existence in this life because we were wrong headed in the last one. I disagree with that notion on both theological and philosophical grounds."

"I feel the same," she found herself saying, and then: "Look, I'm not going to actually become a Buddhist, you know? I wouldn't know where to start."

"Well, that's up to you of course. I would encourage you to explore your feelings in what ever way you can. Have you read anything on Taoism? It has much in common with Buddhism and yet some fascinating differences. I'm sorry – I'm rambling. But to return to what

we were talking about earlier – it's really David I'm worried about."

Penny laughed. "I'm sorry, Andrew. You're not at all what I expected. David worries me too, but I'm not sure there's anything either of us can do about that. He answers to a higher authority than even you. Sorry – I didn't mean to be irreverent."

"You mean to God?"

"No, to his mother. I don't think God comes into it at all."

Andrew nodded and allowed himself a sideways smile. She was not at all what he'd expected either – not the mousy, mild-mannered housewife he'd remembered from her last appearance at church. This was a woman who could look after herself, though judging by the slight swelling, the nose piercing was recent and he feared a middle aged woman did not undergo such a thing unless she was reacting violently to forces that were tearing her in opposite directions.

"Did it hurt?"

"This? Yes, it did."

They were laughing, knocking back the last of the wine, when Angela put in an appearance. She was perhaps expecting Penny to have her head in her hands, to be looking downcast, or blushing with indignity. Instead though, she was twirling her hair girlishly, giggling, almost flirting with the vicar, and the vicar was enjoying every minute. Angela was not pleased by this – the useless man had not been invited here to enjoy himself, but to rubber-stamp her outrage all over Penny's insolent forehead.

Penny looked up as if impatient at being disturbed. "Everything all right, Angela?"

Angela looked rather cross, then ducked back out.

"That was a bit rude of her," said Penny. "I'm sorry. I hope your bishop knows how to stand his ground, or they'll be getting rid of you shortly."

"Oh?"

"Your views are far too enlightened."

Andrew laughed again, though he knew she was serious. "Well, from the look on Angela's face, I fear I've rather outstayed my welcome."

"Nonsense, this is my house. Have another glass of wine."

"No... really."

"Well, all right. But I've enjoyed talking to you."

"And I've enjoyed talking to you, Penny."

"You're welcome to call any time, so long as you're not after my soul."

"I don't think I need to worry about your soul. It's in good hands already."

"Thank you. It means a lot to hear you say that. I'm not worried

either. What I am worried about is the battle for the souls of my children. Worried that in order to save their souls, David and Angela will feel compelled to destroy them both first. "

Andrew sighed. He knew very well what she was talking about, saw at a glance the trap she was in. "Boys grow," he said. "Adam is already a young man."

"And no matter what he does it'll never be good enough."

"Good enough for you though!"

"As much as that counts for anything, yes,... whatever he does, whatever either of them do is more than good enough for me, so long as they manage to stay out of trouble. But trouble waits for the unwary, doesn't it? It waits for those who fall off the rails, or those who feel they have no choice but to jump, because they don't like the direction they're being driven in."

In spite of the rather sobering conclusion to her talk with the vicar, Penny found herself singing as she sorted out the washing basket. It was the task she hated most, heaving the sour smelling garments out, and the basket always seemed to fill up of its own accord the moment her back was turned, so that she could never keep ahead of it. But for some peculiar reason that evening, she discovered ABBA lightening her mood.

"Knowing me, Knowing you... Ah-haaaa-a!"

It had been an unexpectedly good day, but that was insufficient, and now she wanted to tell someone about it, tell them why it had been a good day. And she could hardly share her reasons with David, since he and his mother were at the butt end of it. *Do you know what the vicar said to me, after all of that? Do you know what he said, Phil?*

Well, why couldn't she tell Phil?

Oh, where was he when she needed him? He would have loved the whole story: the vicar turning out to be on her side! Where had he been these last few weeks? She'd been secretly dying to test his reaction to her nose-stud at the class that morning, but he'd been missing again. Then, as she rose from the washing machine the chain gave an unexpected little tug.

"Naughty boy, Phil. Don't you go tickling me there!"

She'd been moody and childish at the retreat, say nothing of a little crazy but, that had been the crisis building inside of her. It was gone now and she had Phil to thank for it – well, Phil and the Vicar. Amazing! There were some men, it seemed who could look at her, like what they saw, and believe in her!

She wanted to apologise to Phil for not saying goodbye to him properly. She'd tried bumping into him at the orchard but it was cold, and barely light enough to see of a morning now. She guessed he'd stopped going. She'd hung on there for a while practising, and Lara

had come down to make tea in the Summer House. She'd seemed odd – not exactly unfriendly, but there was something. Did she disapprove, of Penny? Penny had tried to steer the subject onto Phil, but Lara had steadfastly steered it away again. If only she'd given Phil her number! No... hold on, Penny, what is this? The minute you start to feel light headed, you're ready to give him your number?

Where was he? It couldn't be over, could it? All those impossible coincidences: these were things that had changed both their lives! How could they just stop now? Would a different set of coincidences step in and hold them apart, against the odds, like a diabolical tide? No. This all meant something, and so she knew she would see him again, just as soon as she stopped trying.

And that was why she was singing.

CHAPTER 31

"Phil?"

"Pen?"

It was the following week, in the Co-op. Both were in the wine section, stocking up for a serious night in. She wasn't sure it was him at first – he seemed to have lost all his hair, except on closer inspection she saw he'd shaved it really close – that the dark stubble of his receding hairline was the same as it had always been. She took him in for a moment and decided she rather liked the way he looked, but she was also afraid of the way he was suddenly making her feel. She was moistening, and... *god I'm actually... itching for him!*

"Pen, you look stunning!"

"Mutton dressed as Lamb according to the monster-in-law."

"She really didn't say that."

"No. Well, not to my face, anyway."

"And I like the nose-ring. I thought you were joking when you said you were having it done."

"I was, but I decided to go for it anyway."

"Good for you!"

"Looks like I'm not the only one who's had a change of image."

Self consciously, Phil smoothed the top of his head. "It's a bit severe, I think."

"No, I like it."

He brightened "Really? Do you think I should keep it?"

"Definitely."

"I thought it made me look like a monk – especially when I'm practising the form."

"Do you still practice? I've not seen you for a while."

"I'm still practising, yes. I've just not been to the class for a bit. It's been difficult lately – you know how it is?"

"Yes... I know. Anyway, this part of town's bit off the beaten track for you isn't it?"

Actually it wasn't. The Co-op was just around the corner from Richie's, and Phil came in here most evenings now. "Well, I try not to visit the same off licence too often," he joked. "I have a guilty conscience – don't want anyone thinking I'm turning into an alcoholic, even though I probably am."

She looked at her basket – two bottles of wine, a bottle of Bacardi and a bottle of Coke. "I know what you mean."

If you made love to me Phil, we'd have no need for this stuff. I'd make you breathless, make you beg for sleep, and I'd fall asleep right on top of you! There'd be no need for all this pathetic booze!

He took a deep breath. "So. How are things? Have you seen anything of Blakedon?"

"No. You?"

"Nothing. And there's been no fallout at home?"

"No. They all have poker faces. I don't know if they know I'm on to them or not. I'm just carrying on as normal. But I'm tempted to think we've sorted it. And you?"

"Oh... same as always, pretty much."

Penny caught his reply like a hook in the eye – the lie was so obvious. She'd heard his words but was painfully conscious of the fact they did not match what she'd read in his face. She'd no idea what it was, but something had happened.

She gave him an enquiring look: "Phil?"

He was searching for a way out now. Eyes twitching, from side to side. Penny was puzzled. What was he going to do? Make run for it? He *was*,... he was looking for a way out!

"I'll perhaps see you on Sunday, Pen," he said.

It wasn't her business. There was nothing between them. They were married to other people for pity's sake, and if he wanted to bolt away like a frightened rabbit that was up to him, and she had to let him go. But if all that was true then why was she suddenly hanging on to his basket so tightly the wires were digging into her fingers.

"You won't be there on Sunday!" she said.

Phil looked at her fingers clamped there, holding on to the basket, holding on to him. There seemed to be something urgent, something desperate in her grip. "I... I should be able to make it."

"No you won't. You're avoiding me again."

He feigned surprise, but badly. "I am not."

"Don't come the innocent with me. And anyway it's pointless! You know what happens when we try avoiding each other."

"What?"

"We bump into each other... well... like this!"

He hung his head and Penny was dismayed. Don't do that Phil. Hold your head up! It's a fine face, a face to be proud of, a face that makes me proud!

"Really, I'm not avoiding you."

"And you're a crap liar too."

He smiled, but he was crying – not sobbing out loud, but his eyes had filled and she could see him holding back. There was only one thing she could think of that might have caused it. He'd been so calm, so sure, so centred of late – not like the weary Phil she'd first met so long ago. Oh, God! It had finally happened! Sally had kicked him out!

"You've split up," she said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I've not seen you. And anyway, there's nothing to tell."

"Where are you living? Are you with your brother?"

"Pen... how do you know all this?"

"I guessed! What happened? Tell me!"

Phil looked at her – looked hard. She was fantasy made flesh, for surely nothing real could ever be so vital, so valuable and sweet as this. And she was right: there was no point in hiding. He could deny things all he wanted, lie to protect her, to stop her from throwing her marriage away by throwing herself at him, he could have joined the Foreign Legion, emigrated, or joined the circus, but all to no avail – something would have happened, something impossible would have brought them back together like this. For this:

"Sally thinks we're having an affair," he said. "She confronted me with it and I walked out."

He waited for her reaction but Penny couldn't speak. It was one thing to have an intuition but quite another to have it confirmed. Phil ploughed on into the silence: "Perhaps I should have stayed. Do you think I should have stayed? She didn't actually tell me to go. She only said we'd nothing to talk about, because I wouldn't admit to it, you see? But she didn't tell me to go. Mind you she didn't stop me from going either,...."

Penny shook his basket to stop him from rambling. "What made her think it in the first place?"

"Eh? Oh... that was Trevor. He wrote a kind of love-token and planted it round at my house, made it look like it was me who wrote it. It had your name all over it."

"Trevor? That's your father in law, isn't it? But, how would he know about me? How would he know my name?"

"I don't know, Pen. I can't imagine."

"Then how do you know it was Trevor?"

"It can't have been anyone else. I've not spoken to him – he'd only deny it, and I've not seen Sally in nearly a month now. Or perhaps I did write it. I've wondered if I might have done it unconsciously – like sometimes when you put your car keys in the refrigerator. Have you ever done that?"

Penny shook his basket again so that his wine bottles chinked together. "But... the children, Phil."

"I can't think about them. I'm all right as long as I don't think about them."

"Put down your basket."

"I can't. You're holding onto it."

"Put down your basket and come with me."

"Where?"

"We'll go and talk to Sally. We'll sort this out – I'm so sorry Phil. You don't deserve this. You should have said, and it’s easily sorted."

Phil was suddenly blind with terror at the prospect of seeing Sally. "You don't understand. She won't believe a word we say. You were right before: it's like they want us to be having an affair in order to fit some peculiar view they have of reality, or of me. If we turn up together, that'll only confirm things."

"It sounds like you've nothing to lose. It's worth a try."

"No it's not. And, all right, maybe I've nothing to lose, but you have. So stay away from me, Pen."

"No."

"No? What do you mean, No?"

"I mean, *the fuck I will*, NO: I won't stay away from you, you big, bald lummox. And anyway, what do you mean: stay away from me? Are we not friends any more?"

Phil looked around. He couldn't believe they were having this suddenly heated conversation in the middle of the Co-op. It was empty, fortunately, except for the girls on the till who were obviously straining to hear what was going on. He lowered his voice a little. "I mean, you're still married. Don't risk it. Your marriage, your family – it's the most precious thing in the world. It's just a pity we have to lose it before we realise it."

"How about a crap marriage? Is that still important?"

"But your boys. You have to protect your boys. Pretend it's not crap for their sake."

"Listen to yourself Phil. Are you saying it's okay to live a lie? That's as bad as letting people change you into whatever they want you to be. That's living a lie too, remember? And we're not like that any more. We are not a lie, Phil!"

We are not a lie!

That's what she'd said, and it hit him square in the face. It had puzzled him for a long time, what it was that bound them, and it was simply that: they were not a lie – except for the locket in Penny's pants – which admittedly would have taken some explaining, but it was complicated and anyway, Phil didn't know about that yet.

"Phil?"

"It's not your problem Pen. It's not your fault. If anyone has to go and see Sally it's me. If anyone has to punch Trevor in the nose, it's me."

He was paralysed though. She could see that. He wouldn't do either of those things. "Are you all right, Phil? I mean are you safe? Have you somewhere to go?"

"Yes, I'm at my brothers, like you said."

She nodded, as if thinking through to a future that Phil could not imagine. "Does Trevor play golf?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And is he a member of Hall-i'th-Wood?"

"Yes... Penny are you psychic?"

"No, just guessing. Frank plays golf there as well, you see?"

"But I thought you said Frank was a good guy. He wouldn't make trouble for you, surely?"

Penny shook her head. Phil was right – Frank would not have done anything to deliberately set them up. But it would only have taken a few words of innocent gossip between golfing cronies for names to become known, connections made... what the gods gave with one hand it seemed they took away with the other.

"Run away with me, Phil."

"I know you don't mean that."

"Don't I? How much cash have you got? If we went to the hole in the wall, we could probably raise... oh... five hundred quid between us? People have made a fresh start on a good deal less than that. It would get us to... I don't know... Ibiza? Come on. Let's do it!"

Perhaps it was her mood, but his resolve vanished, and he found himself chucking in the whole of his life, chucking it in gladly just for the dream of being with her, of travelling somewhere, anywhere... with her.

"All right," he said.

"What? Oh... bless you Phil, but you were right, I didn't mean it. And there's really bugger all you can do with five hundred quid these days."

Phil swallowed back his disappointment. Of course he knew they could not have gone, but for a moment the excitement had been so uplifting, so liberating! And Phil was in desperate need of some excitement. When was the last time he'd felt excited about anything?

"Thank goodness for that," he said. "For a minute I thought I was going to be stuck with you for ever."

"I know, but the last thing I need in my life right now is another man's shirts to iron."

"I'm perfectly capable of ironing my own shirts thank you."

She laughed. "That's the spirit." Then she looked again at the contents of their baskets. "We've got one hell of a hangover between us."

"No, I'd never share this wine with you - not at £3.99 a bottle. Don't get me wrong: there's nothing I'd love more than to sit down with you sometime and share a bottle, but it would have to be a more expensive one than this."

"You flatter me. But we had our chance at the retreat and we blew it." *I wish we'd done it Phil. I wish we'd made love.*

"I know. A pair of tongue tied teenagers, that's us." *I wish I'd let you talk me into it Pen.*

She smiled, and in her smile Phil felt an overwhelming wave of sweetness hit him. "I have to go," she said.

"I know you have to go, Pen."

She touched his arm and squeezed gently. "But you will come to class on Sunday?" she said. "Promise me Phil? You need people right now. You need company more than you've ever needed it before."

He nodded, then watched her go. He felt like someone cast adrift in a cold sea, watching all hope of rescue go sailing carelessly by. He was freezing, and he was drowning, and she was right: he'd feel better for seeing the faces at the class – Lara and Arthur, and Doc Lin... but Penny most of all.

CHAPTER 32

On the Thursday evening of that week, Marty was disturbed half way through the Simpsons by a knock at the door. His mother was in the kitchen angrily stirring a pan of beans. Elspeth was engrossed in Homer's antics, but Marty had seen the episode before and was a little bored with it. Still, he didn't like being disturbed between six and half past – even when his mother called to say his tea was ready. When the knock came again he gave an impatient grunt, got up and answered the door hastily, then went to fetch Sally.

"Mum, there's some woman at the door wants to speak to you."

Sally wasn't in the mood for visitors. She'd already had two cold callers and though the beans were nearly burnt, the pizza was still ten minutes away. When she went to the door she was ready to slam it in anyone's face who did not have a very good excuse for being there. And she did not know this woman, this rather well dressed, well groomed woman.

"Hi, I'm Penny Barnes," said Penny.

It took a moment for the name to register, then Sally closed her eyes, as if willing this apparition to disappear. When she opened them and Penny was still there she glared hard, but Penny didn't flinch. "I can't do this now," said Sally.

"Well, that's up to you," said Penny. "But I think we need to."

"What? What do you want? How do you know where I live?"

"Oh... I gave Phil a lift back here one evening."

"I don't remember."

"You were out." Did that sound challenging? Could it have been misconstrued? You were out and we had a ball? Penny didn't care – let the stupid woman think what she wanted! No – hold on Penny – you came to smooth things over, remember?

Sally was afraid. Penny didn't fit the picture of a brassy mistress. Her words, her presence, everything about her felt wrong. "What do you want?"

"Have you heard from Phil?"

"Like I'm going to tell you."

"I didn't think you had. He's at his brother's. You should call him."

"I know where he is, thank you."

"Then call him, or go and see him."

"You've got a nerve!"

"I only want to say one more thing, and then I'll go. You've made a mistake. Phil and I are not having an affair. We're friends, yes, and I think he's a great guy, but I've already got a husband and I've never once wanted yours." That wasn't strictly true, thought Penny, but

there was a world of difference between what a girl wanted and what she allowed herself to have. "He's lost without you and the kids. This is all a terrible misunderstanding."

But Sally was scowling, angry... and Penny was thinking: my god Phil! Is she like this all the time?

"He should have thought of that before he walked out, then, shouldn't he?"

But you're so predictable Sally. Your every word is in my head before you say it! "He left because you didn't believe him. He didn't know what else to do. Now he's in a sick daze, waiting for a call, for a hug, for a sign of love. You can mend this Sally. You can put this right."

"If you think you know him so well, why don't you go hug him better yourself?"

Oh, don't tempt me you stupid woman. "You've made a mistake. It's really not like that at all."

"Like I'm going to believe you."

"Goodbye, Sally. Please think about what I've said."

Sally stared after her, unable to measure just how deep her hatred was. It did not matter that somehow she knew Penny was not sleeping with her husband. It did not matter that her father had probably made the whole thing up: she still hated her. And she hated Phil just as much, which was an awful lot of hatred indeed for no apparent reason. No, they weren't having an affair, she knew that, but it was easier to go on believing they were – the alternative was just too complicated, and Sally liked things simple.

So, he needed a sign she loved him did he? Well what about her? The only way he knew how to show her he loved her was by pestering her for sex all the time – no matter they'd not made love properly in nearly a decade, it was the impression that counted. And Phil's every look, every gesture, every touch was just a boringly predictable precursor to sex. And all she wanted was flowers and flattery and someone to make her feel important, without the attendant spectre of a tiresome shag hanging over her all the time. But for now the pizza was cold, the beans were sticking to the bottom of the pan, and in the summer there would be no one to mow the grass. And it was all Phil's stupid fault!

"Why don't you move back in with me for a bit?" said Trevor. He was growing a little weary of getting up on weekday mornings to bully the children through breakfast, and out to school on time. "Sell the house. I've got five good bedrooms and four are going to waste. You could have your old room back – how's that?"

It did not cross his mind that Emmeline might have had something to say about these plans but, like everyone else, he'd already decided

she'd come round to his way of thinking in the end. Sally felt a peculiar tug. She liked her house, liked what she and Phil had done to it over the years, and she would never know the luxury of an en-suite bathroom if she sold up and moved back into her old room. And moving back into her old room meant divorce. It meant solicitors and an impenetrable wall of legality, of settlements and arguments.

For now Phil's stuff was still there, his clothes in the wardrobes, his shoes in the porch, his books scattered about. For now it was like he was just a bit late home from work, that he'd come back eventually, a little tired, a little dishevelled, then shuffle into the kitchen and make himself a brew – perhaps call through and ask if she fancied a cheeky glass of wine. And all the time he'd been seeing this Penny Barnes behind her back – except he hadn't, had he? Oh, yes he had – the brassy bitch had said herself they were friends, and men did not become friends with women, especially good looking women, women with "shag-me" dimples. Everyone knew that. And everyone had seen "When Harry met Sally": Men and women could never be friends "because the sex always gets in the way". So what if they weren't having an affair right now?... Given time... well, it was obvious...

Phil had never said a word, but her dad had known – that's what the note was about. It wasn't a joke. He'd known the truth, and was simply warning her. You couldn't blame him for that – he was her dad and always had her best interests at heart. Yes, Penny Barnes had been good looking enough. She could imagine Phil falling for her, the shameless tart. Even if he was too dim to know it himself, Sally knew better.

"We could even knock through into the box room. It's crying out for a conversion," said Trevor.

Sally caught her breath: "You mean... an en-suite bathroom?"

"Whatever pleases you, my dear."

CHAPTER 33

At around the same time Penny was putting her point of view across to Sally, Phil was having a long soak in the bath while wondering idly about calling Scrotum and crying off work again in the morning. He'd only missed the one day so far – the day he'd gone a bit mad with the Tai Chi, but increasingly he was having difficulty psyching himself up to get out of bed and go in. Another machine had broken down that day, given up in despair at its decrepitude. There'd been no way to repair it, and no money to replace it, but so far as Scrotum was concerned the job still had to be finished on time. In short, the firm had become incompetent. But worse than that, the slow decline, the lack of money, the penny-pinching – it all seemed to be just another symptom of a life gone wrong, another thing that wasn't working as it should have been.

He hadn't always felt like this. The firm had been incompetent for a long time, but he'd always found a way of struggling on with a smile. Sometimes though something happened, something entirely unrelated and it changed your outlook entirely so that everything thereafter seemed foul. He'd taken to reading up on Buddhist philosophy, following Penny's example, and had become caught up on the idea of non-attachment. He wasn't sure he'd read it right, but he felt detached now, felt better for it too, not quite so dirty, and was looking for still more things he could detach himself from. Work was a pain in the arse and therefore an obvious candidate except, a determination to detach oneself was in itself a form of attachment, and therefore self defeating. So maybe he should just go in anyway, shrug his shoulders at the madness and do the best he could, like he'd always done. Was that the more genuine form of detachment, rather than simply throwing a sickie?

He was trying to think this one through when Richie tapped on the door to say there was a woman downstairs who wanted to see him.

Phil leaped from the bath at once: "Penny?"

"No, it's a Chinese woman. Lynne somebody or other?"

"Doc Lin?"

Phil half dried himself and put on a robe. By now Doc Lin was in the kitchen, chatting to Richie who was attending to the kettle. She was immaculate: navy blue suit, ivory silk blouse, shiny hair – a very beautiful woman, he thought.

"Ah, Philip. How are you?"

"Oh... good, thanks."

"No he's not," said Richie.

"No, you aren't," said Doc Lin. "Can tell by look of you."

Phil wasn't sure if he was okay or not, but he trusted Doc Lin, and suddenly decided he was feeling weary and old. She took his wrists. "Tongue please? "

"I'm fine really!"

"Missing Tai Chi, Philip. Tut, tut. Very bad."

"Are you checking up on me?"

"Chi is like a kettle of boiling water. Stop practice, take away heat, and kettle will not boil any more. Okay? Ear ringing?"

"A bit."

"Hmn. Take me to bed."

"What?"

Richie clattered the cups, nearly dropping one.

"You've had shock, Philip. Let me do this for you. Free of charge. Okay?"

"Em..."

She was already taking out a sealed pack of sterile needles, which clarified matters. Phil's eyes were filling up again at the thought of her kindness. Doc Lin could see he was emotional and smiled. "Philip?"

"Thank you," he said.

"Show me to bed." She slipped off her jacket and handed it to Richie. "Thank you Richard. This will only take a moment. Tea please. No sugar, or milk of cow. Both very bad."

Richie was nonplussed, distracted. "Em... I know... been telling Phil that for years."

She turned on the bedside light as Phil, rather awkwardly lay down on the small single bed. "Relax," she said, but she sparkled as she said it.

"You're very good at what you do, you know?"

"Yes, yes, Mr Markham. Now relax."

"Ouch!"

"Breathe in. Now breathe out – relax yes?"

"Okay."

As she began to apply the needles she asked him: "Richard is married?"

"Em... no."

"Gay?"

"What? No... he just never got around to it. He likes peace and stillness, I suppose. Marriage and children are not conducive to a peaceful life, are they? I think he took one look at me and that put him off. But what about you? Did you never marry? You're such a lovely person I find it hard to believe no one ever asked you."

She chuckled. "You flatter me, Mr Markham."

"Ouch. I thought I was Philip."

"Person is always Mr or Mrs when applying needles. Must show

respect for patient. Relax please. Someone asked me for marriage once, yes. But career came first in those days, and ambition. Now I have missed boat, I think."

"And your ambition brought you to Middleton?"

She detected the sarcastic tone in his voice. All right, Middleton was not exactly a pretty town, but she could have shown him much worse in China. "Middleton is not so bad. To a person living in China, Middleton UK sounds as exotic and far away as Beijing or Shanghai does to you. All things are relative and all that matters is balance – balance of self, Mr Markham. If self is balanced, anywhere is home."

"That's very philosophical."

"Philosophical? No. Common sense. Don't lose your balance, Mr Markham. Change is the only certainty in life. Things happen. If we are balanced, good things will happen to us. If we are not, then we invite misfortune. This is my understanding. Now relax. I drink tea with Richard. Check back in thirty minutes. Okay?"

The needles were in a different configuration on his body this time – arms, legs, head. He felt weird, but as usual the sensation was not unpleasant. The other things she'd taught him: the Qigong and the meditation also opened up a space for him in his mind, a very warm and relaxing place where he imagined himself settling down. Before thirty minutes were up, he was asleep.

Richie watched from the doorway while Doctor Lin removed the pins, and he winced as she dabbed at the little spots of blood on his brother's skin. "Philip is very tired," she said.

"It was good of you to come."

"He has friends at class. Friends who are worried for him. I was worried for him."

"It was still good of you."

"I like Philip. He is very good man. Very gentle. Very kind."

"Will he be okay?"

"Okay, yes. This is my understanding. We must get him through this bad patch. Let him find his feet again. Remember himself."

She was smart and sensitive. Richie tried to guess her age. There was such an air of health and vitality about her she should only have been in her twenties, but that was clearly not the case.

"Was it Penny who told you?" he asked. Richie was intensely curious about the mysterious Penny Barnes, but could hardly get anything out of Phil on the subject.

"Yes."

"What is it with those two? I mean... I know they're not having an affair... so?"

She looked at him and sighed. "They were made for each other, long time ago, Richard. In mean time, they both marry someone else."

Phil finally broke the surface of his consciousness as the first pale light of dawn touched the curtains of his room. He remembered having the needles inserted and at first he was reluctant to move in case they were still there. Gently, he tested himself, flexing his fingers, then tensing his arms and legs. Good: No needles. He felt refreshed and calm. He would have to call round at the clinic, he thought, to thank Doc Lin. He wondered if she liked flowers. Of course she did. All women liked flowers.

But there was no need. She was in the garden. He saw her through the French window when he went downstairs. She was practising a very slow and fluid form of Tai Chi that was eerie to watch. He wasn't used to seeing her doing the form herself – not properly – but only as an instructional aid, for others to copy. This was altogether different – she was moving, obviously, but the impression was one of profound stillness.

Then it struck him: it was dawn and she was still here?

"Coffee?" asked Richie.

Phil turned to find him in his dressing gown, his grey hair messed up, and what Phil could only describe as the light of revelation in his eyes. He was unable to hide his astonishment. "You slept with Doc Lin?"

Richie gave it a moment's thought, as if he had to check and confirm that it had indeed been real and not a dream. "Yes. Is there a problem with that?"

Phil looked again at the figure of Doc Lin. He was seeing her suddenly in a new light, as a woman, and as a human being, instead of a mere saviour goddess. "Em... no..." he said.

"You don't sound so sure."

"Just a bit... sudden, isn't it?"

"Well... it might seem that way to you. But we must have talked until three in the morning. It felt like the most natural thing in the world."

"Sorry Richie... I..."

"You'd no ambitions there yourself had you?"

"What? No! Are you forgetting I'm married?"

"And are you forgetting you're separated?"

"Separated?"

"Well, what else do you call it?"

"Okay, you're right. But it's just a temporary thing. I feel different this morning. I'm going to ring Sally. Maybe I'll call and see her after work. Just..."

"What?"

"Doc Lin. Go easy. She's a very special lady."

Phil watched as his brother's eyes were drawn to the window. "Let

me ask you one thing," he said, but Richie was unable to peel his eyes away. "What she's doing, does that embarrass you? Are you thinking: oh, God, please don't let the neighbours see? Is it weird to you?"

"Do you take me for some kind of moron?"

"Then what are you thinking?"

"I'm not thinking anything. All I can see is her... She's amazing, Phil!"

Phil smiled and went to put some clothes on. It was the craziest thing he'd ever heard: his brother and Doc Lin, but he was cheered by it. It also meant he'd be seeing a lot more of her himself, and that had to be good.

Sally wasn't answering the telephone and when he called round after work, the house was empty. He had a key but didn't want to go in. Partly to avoid testing the uneasy feeling she might have changed the locks, but also because it felt more like her place now than his – that entering alone would have been to trespass on her privacy. They were round at Trevor's then. He swallowed hard and rang the number.

It was Marty who answered.

"Oh, hi Marty. It's Dad." He used the same cheery tone as when calling from work to say he'd be late, but given everything that had happened he realised it perhaps wasn't appropriate here. It was just that upon hearing Marty's voice, he'd had to armour himself with something.

"When are we coming home, Dad?"

Pause. Deep breath. "I don't know, Marty. How long have you been there?"

"Came last night. Mum said it's easier for getting us to school, but I think we're here for good."

"Is Mum there?"

There was a pause, muffled voices, then Trevor came on the line – blustering, officious. Phil deliberately didn't listen, or he'd be jumping down the bastard's throat for setting him up. He just waited for a pause in the noise.

"Is Sally there, Trevor?"

More bluster, more words that seemed oddly disconnected. He caught the phrase 'responsibility towards one's family', then the words, disgrace, selfish and arsehole. Phil raised his eyebrows at that. Evidently Trevor was upbraiding him for walking out on a marriage that Trevor himself had torpedoed. Could it be the man was so deluded he believed his own lies? It was entirely possible. Phil had done it himself that time, sort of hypnotised himself into believing in a different version of reality to the one everyone else saw.

He waited for a pause again.

"Put Sally on please, Trevor."

But Sally was behind the steel bars of Trevor's slightly insane protection and Phil could see how – although things had gone badly for him – they had gone even worse for Sally. What was she doing there? Could she not see she had given up on her life – handed it over to that overbearing monster and his sneak-thief of a mistress?

Phil waded patiently through a few more turbulent moments of incoherent bluster, then ended the call and sent a text directly to Sally's mobile. "Couldn't get past your father. Call me when you're ready."

He was still in the car, parked outside his own house. It was obvious what he had to do: move back in, and wait for Sally to come home. There'd be bills that needed paying, dripping taps that needed new washers, and the radiator in Elspeth's bedroom still needed the air bleeding out of it. It troubled him he couldn't bring himself to move back in at once, though. But then he remembered what Penny had said to him: that he was not a lie.

He could hold his head up.

Also, if Doc Lin was going to be calling round again to see Richie, he needed to give them some space didn't he? It was all right him saying it would be good to see more of her but did he want to lie awake at night listening to them making love – it was only a small house after all – and he needed to maintain a respectful distance from Doc Lin, maintain an air of mystique and sorcery. But in returning home he also felt he was closing the door on other possibilities, possibilities he had denied himself for noble reasons. That didn't stop him though from longing for the comfort Penny might have brought to his life, and crossing back over the threshold of this house would be like returning to a land she was absolutely forbidden to enter.

But he was forgetting the coincidences.

CHAPTER 34

Phil returned to the class, and was glad for it. He was no longer choosy about where he stood in the group during practice, and so found himself behind Penny one Sunday morning. She was wearing jogging bottoms and the pink "fall in chocolate" tee shirt, which he'd found hilarious. But it was when bending during the warm-up exercises – a full stretch, touch your toes sort of bend, that Phil happened to notice the rise of a pink thong above her waistband, and the rise of a leather cord above that, a cord that encircled her waist and made him remember something.

She wasn't, was she? No... steady on Phil. She wouldn't!

After practice, they drank tea like old times, Phil, Penny, Lara and Arthur – also Doc Lin and some new recruits to whom everyone was friendly and welcoming in the hope of boosting the class numbers. Afterwards though, as the group split up, Phil found himself alone with Penny, out of earshot of everyone else, only the beady eye of Lara observing them. It was then Penny told Phil she had seen Sally.

"You what?"

"I knew you wouldn't do it yourself, so I did. I'm not your mistress Phil, and I wasn't having her just assuming I was. I wanted to tell her the truth, and the rest was up to her."

"What did she say?"

"She didn't believe me. Didn't even want to believe me."

"Ah."

"You're not angry I went round are you?"

"Angry? No... no you were right to do it. I'm just not surprised, that's all – I mean that Sally felt that way."

"I hope I've not made things any worse."

"I don't think they could be any worse." But even as he said it, he wondered if he was tempting fate.

"I'm really sorry Phil. I just felt I had to speak up for myself. Are you still managing okay?"

Her concern cheered him, made him feel quite stoical. "I'm all right. I moved back into the house. Sally's taken the kids and set up camp at her father's, for some reason. Serves him right. And thanks, by the way, for talking to Doc Lin."

"I wasn't sure about it. It felt like interfering, but you looked so rough the last time I saw you. Plus, there's a part of me suspects she fancies you, and that makes me jealous of course. But I'm only joking."

"Good. But you'll be relieved to hear it's my brother she's interested in, not me."

"Your brother! Oh... Phil... is that good? I think that's good, isn't

it?"

"They seem to have hit it off. That's partly why I'm not living there now. I didn't want to be in the way. "

Penny thought for a while. "Your brother and Doc Lin? Interesting!" She linked arms with him. "Walk me out slowly and tell me all about it. Does anyone else know?"

He was smiling, talking animatedly and Penny was hanging on his every word, laughing and tugging his arm to encourage him to reveal more. To a passer by they might have appeared like lovers, or friends – there was an indefinable innocent intimacy about them. But to a husband, waiting in his car with an already suspicious and vindictive mother beside him, their body language was altogether more revealing.

David felt his world implode – not so much his marriage, more his self constructed sense of respectability, and normality. Angela had been hoping for more than this, but seeing the expression on David's face she realised it was probably going to be sufficient, and well worth the stigma of having missed church the once just to be there.

"I'm so sorry, David," she said, though she was indeed not sorry at all – quite pleased in fact.

David was not a violent man, but he came out of the car like an angry bull. Phil and Penny only realised at the last minute there was a man coming at them, shouting, ranting – but he was wearing a suit, so he couldn't be a mugger, could he? Phil thought to dodge aside, but the man changed tack and raised a fist. He was too slow though and Phil had ample time before it was launched at his head to ready himself and he deflected it with a sideways hook. He heard Penny shouting: "David! What are you doing!" before David came at him again with another clumsy punch. However, though he was a big man, and obviously worked up, his energy was all over the place, dissipated in a million directions and Phil once more found it easy to deflect. He was puzzled by this ability, and half hoped David would throw another punch, so he could try again, just out of curiosity, but David had him by the lapels now and was attempting to shake the life out of him while Penny tried to pull him off.

"David, you idiot! Have you gone completely mad?"

Phil began to catch up: "David?"

This was Penny's husband?

He heard himself saying: "This isn't what it looks like David." But it sounded weak.

That was just before David jabbed his knee in the direction of Phil's privates. Fortunately they'd covered this one in class as well and Phil was able to raise his own knee across himself in self defence. The next move though, according to Doc Lin was a follow through and

strike with bunched fingers which would result in a broken collarbone. Phil didn't want to try that – too complicated anyway, but David was getting more and more worked up, and he had to do something! Circling his arms and dropping his stance, he managed to break David's grip, then gave a firm push. Phil didn't want to hurt him, didn't want him to go down and lose his dignity – because he was Penny's husband! David staggered back several paces, teetered on the edge of losing his balance but managed to stay upright and decided finally Tai Chi was something he didn't know enough about to want to tangle with.

Penny saw the car, saw Angela sitting with an expression that reminded her of a crocodile that had just eaten. And suddenly, David seemed to fade away. He was still there, physically, but he lost all his former substance and meaning. She heard the words: "Fucking whore."

Was that David's voice?

Had he really said the word *fucking*?

Then came Phil's voice, reasonable and calming: "But David, you've made a mistake."

Then David, ranting: "It's you that's made the mistake, dick-brain!"

And Penny was thinking: *Dick-brain*? Had David really just said that? And all the while she was looking at Angela, looking into her eyes, staring hard, waiting for her to blink, but the woman had the lidless stare of a snake, and in the end it was Penny who blinked. The game was lost.

Her life was over.

She looked at David and saw his future, saw him as a fat, middle aged scold of a man – pompous, severe, judgemental and narrow minded. These past fifteen years with her had been a way out of all that. It was a road he might have chosen, a route to an easier going sort of life – less bitterness, less anger, less chance of a heart attack before he was fifty. But people are what they are, and there's only so much one can do. So let his mother have him back, she thought. Except, in handing him back, she was also handing over her children, and she couldn’t do that.

Impasse. She could neither go nor stay.

This would take some working out.

"Thank you Phil," she said. "Thank you for not getting angry over this."

Something in her tone alarmed him – the inappropriate calm, the politeness, the poise. "I'll see you at the class next week," she said. Then she blanked David and walked past him, heading for her car.

Phil called out: "David, stop her... talk to her."

"What? Are you talking to me, dick-brain?"

"Pen... "

Penny called back over her shoulder. "Later Phil... thanks anyway."

She drove away smoothly, very calm, even smiling and waving as if nothing had happened. But instead of turning left out of the car park, and heading in the direction of home, she turned right, towards the ring-road, and goodness knows where.

Phil remained where he was, staring at David, then he became aware of the older woman in the car. David's mother. My God, Penny had been right: she was a monster! Had he anything to reproach himself for? Had he ever once touched Penny? Had he ever once been guilty of more than thinking fondly of her? And were fond thoughts enough to justify what had just happened?

"I'll see you in court then," said David.

"Eh?"

"How does it feel to break a marriage up? Make you feel good, does it?"

"David, if you divorce Penny you're an idiot."

Were these two people also the architects of his own demise then? He wanted to say they were because that would have made it all very simple, but they weren't. Trevor was the sole mastermind of that particular disaster – it just happened to be the same lie he'd hit upon. What were the chances of that? What were the chances of any of this?

"How will your wife feel when I tell her you're an adulterous bastard?"

Was David threatening him now? Would it make any difference what he told Sally? Yes, he thought: It probably would – to have the name Penny Barnes coming at her from another angle would confirm his infidelity in her imagination beyond all possible doubt. But there was nothing Phil could do about that. It all seemed to have an energy and a momentum of its own, and it would run its course whatever Phil did or said to try to head it off. But what bothered him most in all of this was the way Penny had driven off.

He'd never seen her like that before – so quietly, eerily, dangerously calm.

CHAPTER 35

The peculiar thing about dangerous situations is it's only afterwards, having survived them one has the time to think them through and actually feel anything. Phil was in the conservatory, looking out at the garden, bathed in winter sunlight, as the whole list of feelings caught up with him fear, anger, dismay, disbelief. He'd pieced together a very pretty garden over the years, he thought, but he was looking at it now almost as a stranger might. And he felt no connection with it, nor even any connection with the house he'd always thought of as home. Home, he realised, was not a house.

He was more or less living in the conservatory, only going into the house to use the kitchen, the bathroom, and to sleep. The vast majority of his time – the lonely sitting time – he spent in this odd sanctuary. He'd been able to clear it of all evidence of family life: the kids toys, their shoes and bits of cutting out... and free from Sally. He was calm now, but it was not a healthy sort of calm. It was the calm he'd seen in Penny's eyes, a bewildered feeling, a mask, something to pull down over your face, so the world would not worry, while the real business of irreconcilable anguish went on underneath:

Please don't worry about me, I'm all right.

ARRRGH!

The temptation to want to be with Penny was overwhelming. She knew where he lived, and he wanted her to come to him, so they could sit together and lick their wounds, even lick each other's wounds. And they could shake their heads at the madness of it all, then fall into bed and fuck the living daylights out of each other – I mean what possible difference could it make now? And if everyone thought they were at it anyway, what had they to lose? Certainly not their self-respect. No... hold on Phil. Self-respect was exactly the one thing they had to lose: respect for their *selves*, in the eyes of the only people who mattered in this, and that was each other.

Still, the only happy ending he could think of now lay in the direction of Penny. Was that childish of him? You lose one woman and immediately start thinking of getting yourself another? Stupid! Then his mind conjured up a picture of Sally returning home with the kids to find him and Penny in bed, or maybe not even that – perhaps just sitting at the dining table eating a romantic dinner while sipping wine, or even just innocently drinking tea in the conservatory.

Don't be an arse Phil. This changes nothing.

He checked his 'phone – still no messages from Sally. He wished he'd caved in to pressure to buy Marty a 'phone, for then he might have been able to at least keep in touch through the lad.

Things didn't improve much, and on Monday morning he found Scrotum in a bad mood. The youth suggested to Phil that he wasn't pulling his weight. Phil took this in with a strange detachment. He'd possibly had the worst few weeks of his life, and now this arrogant and obnoxiously ambitious little twat was lecturing him about something that wasn't his fault. The obvious answer was to hit him, and walk out into even deeper trouble. Instead Phil told him he was sorry he felt that way, that he would try to do better. These were the correct words, the words Scrotum wanted to hear, but unless the machines were either repaired or replaced, there was little Phil could do. On reflection, over a cup of coffee, Phil decided this was a fair assessment of things. He had kept his head, stated his position, and bore the young man no real malice, but something in Scrotum's eyes had put Phil on alert.

His next meeting with Scrotum was in the afternoon, an altogether more revealing encounter that was presaged by a Scrotum who could not have been more charming. Manufacturing was to be out-sourced, as they say in the highly sanitised parlance of business-speak. The upshot was the decrepit machines were to be scrapped. Phil could accept a position in the shipping office, or he might consider a redundancy package. The job in shipping was of a lower grade than the one he currently occupied – he could keep his present salary, but he'd not to expect a pay rise for a very long time. Meanwhile the redundancy package was very generous, and he should really consider it!

Monday evening then saw him chewing this one over in the conservatory. It was dark, the curtains open, but all he could see was his own reflection in the windows. It was the reflection of a man alone, and Phil was in danger of beginning to feel sorry for this man, when a face appeared at the window, the twisted face of an angry man, banging on the glass with his fists and Phil was so shocked by it he almost shat himself.

"Is she with you, you bastard?"

David? Was that David?

David's voice was muffled through the double glazing and Phil would have shouted back, except he wasn't sure David would be able to hear, but David was hammering on the glass again, so Phil opened the door and went outside, just to stop him from breaking anything.

"You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

David's first move was to grab Phil by the lapels, except Phil wasn't wearing a jacket so David ended up with big fistfuls of Phil's chunky sweater. Phil pushed him off. "For heaven's sake, I haven't seen her."

"I don't believe you."

"Then you're a fool."

David made as if to push his way inside. "I want to see her."

"She's not with me. You really think she's here? Why would you think she was here?"

"Where else would she be?"

"I've no idea!" Phil paused, unsure. Had Penny not gone home then? Where was she? Was she all right?

"Have you 'phoned her friends?"

David flinched, alarmed by Phil's concern – I mean it was David's place to be beside himself with worry over Penny's whereabouts, not this jerk-off with the bald head and the funny pullover. Could it be that Phil was telling the truth? Could it be that Penny was not here? Could it be that Penny was not having an affair at all? This was possible of course, but it made no difference: there was so much else wrong with Penny these days he might as well add adultery to the list.

For some odd reason David's life had imploded, and he needed someone to blame it on other than himself, and Phil was a very plausible candidate. If he wasn't banging Penny right now it was obvious enough that he intended banging her as soon as he could – I mean David had seen them together, seen that look in their eyes. "What did you say?"

"Her friends," said Phil. "Have you phoned them? Does she have family?"

"What's that got to do with you?" David couldn't think straight. Was he missing something here?

Phil thought his assailant was beginning to calm down: "Look, why don't you come in for a brew and we can talk about it?"

But David wasn't calming down at all, and Phil's attempts to placate him were just making matters worse. "Shut up, dick-brain. Just... just shut up!"

"David, we can discuss this like adults or you can be on your way, but lay a hand on me again and I'm going to the police."

"Dick-brain!"

"None of this is my fault, and standing there calling me ‘dick-brain’ isn't going to..."

"Fucking dick-brain!"

David's fist was raised (it was definitely raised, thought Phil), so Phil punched him. He'd never punched anyone in his life before, and it seemed strange such a gentle art as Tai Chi included the knowledge of how to deliver a punch at all, but it did and – once learned – he found it came quite naturally. The punch was swift, coming up from the heel of the right foot, but also relaxed until the last moment when there was a kind of quiver in his hand, just as it made contact. That's when Phil felt David's nose break.

When the bleeding was under control, he took David to the

casualty department of Middleton General, then sat for two hours while the doctor got around to setting it. And all the while Phil wondered if his feet would ever touch the ground again.

"Kids with your mother?"

David nodded.

"Want me to call and let her know you're here?"

David shook his head.

"Listen, I don't know what's been going on," ventured Phil. "Penny's a good woman and you're a lucky guy. We go to the same Tai Chi class. It's a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, you know? We talk, obviously we talk. How can we not? And I like her – but that's all there is to it."

But David was still not to be placated. "I've seen the photo."

Woa! Had David found that picture of him in Penny's locket? Even more worrying, where had he found the locket?

"Em... photo?"

"Kissing you, you bastard?"

"Kissing me?" Oh, that was all right then. "Look... she may have – I don't remember – but if she did it was just... just a friendly peck. That's how Penny is... she's friendly... and tactile. Are you telling me a woman's never kissed you like that? An affectionate peck. You've got completely the wrong end of the stick."

"I don't think so."

"So it *was* you who hired that detective then. That's how you got a photo. Was it outside the class or something? Honestly mate, it's a pity you didn't hire yourself a better one or none of us would be in this mess now."

Phil was beginning to see how pointless this was. David would believe whatever he wanted to believe. "You're reading something into it that's simply not there. Worse than that, it's like you want it to be, or you need it to be true, so you're twisting the facts to suit your own distorted version of things."

"Shut up. Just..."

"You've got to find her, David. And then the two of you have got to sort this thing out. There's more than just a few bruised egos at risk here. You've got your kids to think of, and so have I."

After an interminable evening in A&E, Phil finally dropped David off by his car which was outside Phil's house. David hadn't spoken to him since mention of the children, as if this one thing had been sufficient to sober him – but then he'd just clammed up, refusing to respond to anything more Phil had said.

Phil watched him drive away and felt sorry for him. They had much in common: both of them guys at the mercy of forces they didn't understand, and which they had little hope of ever controlling. The

difference was, Phil knew this to be the case and had begun to see his only salvation lay in disengagement. David, however, was acting like a cock-sure mutt yapping at the wheels of a truck, and was too stupid to get out of the way. It should have made no difference to Phil if the idiot got squashed flat of course – except life was more complicated than that, and he knew the best outcome was for David and Penny to sit down and talk it through, preferably not on the same continent as David's mother. They had to clear away all the deceit, see what was left, see if it was worth picking up and carrying on with.

But Penny was missing.

Except, she wasn't. Phil knew exactly where she would be. They'd been so much on the same wavelength these past months it seemed reasonable to him to suppose they would both think of the same refuge. He found her car parked in the back lane by Lara's orchard. It was a bit late for Tai Chi now, so he'd no idea what Penny was up to. He let himself in through the gate but it was so dark he could barely move without tripping up on the uneven ground. It was ten o'clock and already there was frost on the roof of the summer house. He could see it glinting in the light of a half moon, so he picked his way cautiously towards it and tapped on the door.

"Penny?"

No reply.

"Penny, talk to me, or I'll go and tell David where you are and you can talk to him."

The bolt was drawn and Penny's pale face appeared in the gap as the door groaned open.

She looked cold and tired, her face aged with weariness. This was bad, he thought – not just the way she looked, but the way he felt upon seeing her. She'd driven away looking so proud, like a queen, but now he was seeing underneath the mask, and it was breaking his heart because she so clearly needed someone, and he so dearly wanted that someone to be him.

"Have you seen David?" she asked.

"He was round at my house earlier." As his eyes adjusted to the light, Phil saw she was shivering. There was a car rug spread upon the futon, and an empty carton from a Mcdonald's take-a-way. "Please tell me you didn't sleep here last night?"

Penny said nothing.

"But it's getting down to minus two. Does Lara know you're here?"

Penny shook her head.

"Have you been to work?"

Another shake of the head. "Phoned in sick."

"You can't sleep here. This is dangerous. And stupid. I knew you were going to do something like this when I saw you driving away.

You had that... that look in your eyes. I just knew it!"

"Why don't you take me home with you then? I'm sure Sally wouldn't mind."

Phil thought about it. Of course he thought about it, and Penny could see him playing the scenario forward in his mind.

"I wasn't being serious," she said.

"I know. I'm not completely dense. But you're cold, you're hungry, you're tired and I'm supposed to rescue you – give you a hot bath, wash your hair, rub scented oils into your body, then shag your brains out. right? That's what I'm *supposed* to do, what everyone *expects* me to do, apparently... right?"

"Sounds good so far. Why do I feel there's a 'but' coming?"

He smiled. How come, no matter how bad things became, she was always capable of one last wisecrack?

"You had me going then," she said. "It all sounded so lovely!"

"Bath, hair-wash, meal, and hopefully a good night's sleep: *that* I can do."

She ventured a smile. "No chance of the scented oils?"

"Sorry, the line is drawn at scented oils... and shagging of course."

"But scented oils is a long way from shagging."

"Not to a man they're not. To a man, scented oils come under the heading of serious foreplay – point of no-return foreplay to be precise. A man spends ages rubbing scented oils into a woman's body, he expects a shag afterwards, okay?"

She pretended to sulk. "Okay, I'll remember that. No scented oils then."

"You're a complicated woman, you know?"

"Do I take that as a compliment? I really didn't mean it – about you taking me home with you."

"Yea, I could just see it: you'd be coming out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel and Sally would walk in. No, we'll check you into a motel for a couple of nights until we can think our way through this mess."

"A motel? Why didn't I think of that?"

"Because a part of you would rather cut your nose off to spite your face. Do you need any stuff? Toiletries and things? We'll call at the supermarket on the way. I'll follow you in my car."

"All right..."

"But call David."

"I will," she said.

But it was not a good time to be thinking about David, and there was no way she'd be calling him tonight. It was like the floor had given way on her life and she was still falling. Phil couldn't really help her either because he was falling too, and she reckoned the best they

could do was keep each other company on the way down.

CHAPTER 36

Penny felt ashamed as she pushed a trolley around the supermarket. Her hair was a mess, her clothes were wrinkled and she'd not changed her pants since Sunday. Phil was with her, and it might have been a nice fantasy – the two of them shopping together, except she was terrified of bumping into someone she knew because then she might have to explain.

She understood, now, why Phil had been unable to speak to Sally after they'd split. You deny it's happened first of all, and the only way you can deny it successfully is by not talking to anyone else who might hold a different version of reality to you.

She bought a pack of pants and some tampons because it never simply rains does it? Then she bought some tee shirts and toiletries, and a cheap towelling bathrobe. Then Phil began reminding her she'd only be away for a couple of days, and there was no need to look like she was preparing for a siege. Finally she slipped two bottles of a decent red wine into the trolley. She wasn't preparing for a siege, she thought, but you never knew!

They booked into the Travel Lodge – a twin room, clean sheets and a hot bath, just like Phil had promised. Phil hadn't understood her asking for a twin room, but Penny was paying and she'd do what she bloody well liked, and anyway they had this wine to drink and Phil couldn't very well drive home after that could he?

Phil wasn't going to get drunk, he said, because that might be dangerous and in any case it wasn't going to solve anything was it? And thanks very much but he'd feel much safer in his own bed a couple of miles across town, rather than lying in the one next to Penny.

So since when had he become such a sober stiff ass?

Since right now, Pen.

But he was perfectly safe, she assured him, because she was about to start.

Start? Start what?

Well, what do you think?

Ah...

For now Penny lay back in the bath, warming her bones and slowly regaining a grip on her senses while Phil channel zapped nervously. She was due, but her periods had been a bit erratic recently – time of life and all that, menopause hovering like the grim reaper, but bugger him, she thought: she and Phil could do it if they wanted, without much risk of embarrassment. She wanted to, but she wasn't sure about Phil.

Last night had been the coldest she could remember. Sleep had been impossible with just the car rug. She'd tried huddling round the Primus stove for a bit but then the gas had run out. She'd spent the day off and on doing the form, half expecting Lara to come out, but Penny had been entirely alone. She'd gone to the camping shop for more gas and then to Macky D's for a take-a-way, but was fairly convinced she was going to die in the night of hypothermia. She hadn't been greatly bothered because at another level she'd also known Phil would find her in the nick of time. And he had... because Phil was not Gabriel, just as she was not Caroline. Something else bound them, something beyond idle fantasy, and now, sure enough, here he was. But what was she going to do with him?

Well, she had to be careful for a start. He was right: she could be a bit impetuous, and he cared for her enough to do anything she asked him to, which meant that if she was about to go into self-destruct mode, then she'd most likely end up destroying him as well. She only prayed he had the strength to stand up to her, and save them both.

So, here she was, naked, inappropriately horny, and with a nice man waiting for her in the next room – a man whose sex her less intelligent side had been imagining inside of her for weeks now, a man whose intimate touch she'd been reminded of with every subtle tug of the cord around her waist, with every intimate kiss of the locket against the bud of her clitoris. And it was while wearing only the locket under her robe she emerged from the bathroom.

Blushing, she smiled at him. "It's true what they say: you need to share a room with a man in order to know whether you could live with him or not."

"Oh?"

"You've been channel zapping for half an hour. David does that and it drives me up the wall."

There were two glasses of wine on the table. Phil took one up and sipped at it. "You sound just like Sally."

"Touché."

She felt dangerously self destructive now and wondered about draping herself over the bed, loosening the gown so it would fall open, perhaps even exposing her sex and the golden locket nestling in her bush? What would he say? Would he tell her to cover herself? Would he politely avert his eyes? Or would he do what any man who'd been falsely accused of being her lover was supposed to do, and throw himself on top of her anyway? After all, that's what she needed right now: a man and not this,.. this stupid politeness! What would he say? Say something Phil!

"Forgive me for asking this, Pen, but have you been wearing that locket? It's just that I thought I noticed something at the class on

Sunday, when you bent over."

Penny widened her eyes in mock horror. "You were gawking at my fat arse?"

"Your... bottom is not fat: it's... magnificent. And no I was not gawking at it. Gawking is too strong a word. But seriously, do you wear it?"

She nodded. "Yes, but it's,.. complicated. Don't go getting any ideas about what it means."

"But it's me that's in it?"

"Yes. Do you want to see?"

Phil nodded, misunderstanding, not thinking for a moment she was wearing it right now – she'd just come out of the bath for heaven's sake! He thought she might have pulled it out of her handbag or her pocket or something, but Penny astonished him by unfastening the robe and slipping it off. How did he feel about that? Well, his mouth ran dry and he felt afraid – quite terrified by the sight of her, because she was stupendously naked, and he didn't know what she wanted from him, didn't know if he could give it to her, but he said nothing to dissuade her. Instead, he watched mesmerised as she tossed the robe onto the bed.

She had done this, she told herself, in order to shatter any illusions Phil might have had about her body. Her breasts weren't too bad – a little on the big side for her liking but not too droopy yet. Her bulging and folded suet dumpling of a stomach was another matter though, while she was certain the backs of lumpy thighs were enough to make any man run away screaming. She raised her arms above her head, like she imagined a stripper would do and turned slowly, sexily, so he could see her sagging backside.

That'll cure him of that one, she was thinking.

"Still say I've not got a fat arse?"

If Phil had been desperate for a woman with a young body, and stupid enough, he would have tried to ruin himself on a teenage mistress years ago. Women got older, and their soft flesh was vulnerable, but men still loved them, didn't they? They loved them at a deeper level – one that women perhaps did not understand, or accept was even possible. He was looking at Penny now and wondering how it had come to this.

Apart from Sally, she was the only naked woman he'd seen – at least in the flesh – since he'd got married. He felt calm, but it was the calm of experience, of a maturity he had not known he'd possessed until that moment. He wanted her – of course he did – but for the time being his common sense was holding out, and he was moved more by how her body also seemed to reveal her vulnerabilities, and in that moment he loved Penny more than he had ever loved anyone in his

whole life. He was also more certain than he had ever been, that he could never have her, never know her as he truly wanted to know her.

She was sensitive about the stretch marks, and the cellulite – all women were, he supposed – and it was this exposing of her that made him look afresh at Penny, made him ache – not so much for her, but for that dream of love, a love he had never really known. But such a love was pure fantasy – beyond the power of any woman to grant.

Wasn't it?

The golden glint of the locket was balanced by the gold band in her nose – these two things being the only points of light upon a body that spoke of darkness and fecundity. Fecundity? But she's middle aged for pity's sake. Nothing to look forward to but a dry pussy and HRT. Get real Phil!

Then what was it? What was behind that look? Why did it haunt him so? Why did it make him feel he had only to touch her and new life would begin – if not in her womb, then in some other way, psychological, spiritual... something that would complete them both in ways their other lives had never done, and would never do?

"How long have you been wearing it?" he asked.

"Since the night I took it."

He stared at it, felt himself nestling inside that golden vessel, resting in the heat and the warmth of this woman. What did he mean to her? It had to be something more than nothing. Didn't it?

"Look, Phil, what does it take to get your blood up? Am I going to have to start stroking myself or something?"

"If you do, I'm off."

"You can't go. In case you hadn't noticed, I'm trying to seduce you."

"No you're not. You're showing me you're a middle aged woman – either to put me off, or so later on you can say I'd been warned beforehand you weren't exactly a teenager."

Intuitive? Yes... Phil was definitely intuitive. "So... you're sitting there and thinking what? I wouldn't mind a bit of that, or jeeze I think I'm going to puke?"

"Penny, shut up. You're beautiful, but let's not do this now. This is *exactly* what they would expect us to do. David assumed you were round at my place, that you'd come to me – and I'm sure Sally's thinking I've gone to you, if she's thinking about me at all that is, which I'm beginning to seriously doubt, by the way. But whatever... we'd still be doing it on their terms wouldn't we? And doing it for what? To stick two fingers up at them? That's no way to start our story. They'd still be part of it."

She reached for the robe and slipped back into it. She felt stupid. What was she thinking of – stripping off like that? What must he be thinking of her? Shameless tart!

"You had me on a plate just then, you know."

"I don't want you on a plate, Pen."

"Don't want me at all perhaps?"

Phil regarded the wine. Her tone was playful, flirting, but, as usual, there was an ironic edge to it –don't go dark on me, Penny. Was it better not to touch the wine, not to risk losing himself to it, or was it safer to drink it as fast as possible and render himself incapable, if he should succumb to the urge to do something stupid later on? And now she was covered all he could think of was the damned locket, that she was wearing it around her waist and it was nestling all shiny and safe in her lovely, inviting bush with its tight little curls, and there was an image of him in it, an image she kept close – yet they were not lovers. It haunted him, and it aroused him – but most of all it aroused him.

"You're a really naughty girl, Pen."

"I'll take that as a no then."

"Of course I want you."

He wanted her? That was the most concrete thing she'd ever heard him say. Not that it meant much of course – I mean emotionally – he was a man after all and his wants were easily aroused. "I hope you're not incapable or anything. I've not had it in such a long time and I don't want it to be a let down. I want a man like a jackhammer on top of me and I want it to blow my mind. So, if you've any problems getting it up you can just bugger off now."

He smiled. "Nothing like a bit of pressure, eh?"

"Oh that's me, a proper dominatrix."

"Penny, stop! This whole thing with David – it's just a stupid misunderstanding, remember? He'll see it sooner or later, then give you the satisfaction of a grovelling apology – so don't go writing your life off just yet."

"My life? My life goes on, Phil. It's just my marriage that's over."

"You can't say that."

"Oh? Like you can say your marriage still has some mileage? You want the honest truth: this has been coming for a long time – for both of us. You can go on hoping if you want to, and I'll be a friend for you until you wake up to that fact. But for me, my marriage is over and this is day one of my unmarried life."

"No – you're just saying that because it makes things sound easier and cleaner somehow. But really it's very messy – like when one of the kids filled its nappy – remember those days? You could tell by the stink and though you tried to ignore it sometimes, you knew you were going to have to deal with it sooner or later."

"Nice," she said. "Comparing marriage to a smelly nappy. Why didn't I think of that? I was wrong, maybe you should try taking up poetry. *My life is really crappy, just like a smelly nappy*!" He was right

though, it would have to be faced, except she wasn't listening and no amount of colourful metaphor or rational thinking was going to help. So... back to self-destruct mode then: "Perhaps we should have picked up some condoms at the supermarket. I've never been on the pill or anything. But then I don't think I'm capable of conceiving at my time of life. Not first time anyway, so we're probably okay. It took me about six months for both of my boys... so I don't mind the risk... if you don't... I mean..."

"I thought you were about to start,... you said,.."

"Oh... so you might be interested then?"

"I didn't say that."

"I'm due any time, but not tonight. Plus I'm clean from all known sexually transmitted diseases, so what have we to lose?"

"Pen, stop! Just stop! We're neither of us teenagers, and there's something I think we need from each other that's far more intimate than that modern sleazy kind of sex. Can we give it to each other, do you think, without us also wanting to put our hands down each other's trousers?"

She was puzzled. "Name it. You can have anything from me, anything!"

"I just want to hold you... and weep."

Her face crumpled. He had hit upon the one button she'd been searching for, and she was already holding out her arms for him. He felt his breath collapse when he held her and the heat of her was like heaven warming him. It had been so long – such an unbearably long time, and it seemed cruel he'd had to find this in the arms of another woman. But this was not just any woman. She was not Sally, of course, but neither was she Caroline, and that made her very special indeed. He buried his head in her neck, wept out the confusion and the despair, and did not care if he died.

"What'll we do Pen?"

She could feel herself sobering up – nothing like a good cry for that! God how she could talk! Push, push, push – just like in the push hands... and always Phil was the one reacting, guiding her back to the centre. "I don't know," she said. "Let's talk about it in the morning."

In the normal run of things, Penny would indeed have ventured to feel for a certain stiffening of something, and then encourage it with her fingertips until Phil was aflame enough to tear open her dressing gown. She did consider it, through the blaze of her tears, and she did not agree with him that they should not begin an affair simply because it was what everyone expected – because it wasn't technically an affair now was it? She would have been happy to take him for no other reason than she wanted him, and half an hour of mad sex with this lovely man would have blotted out the pain of everything else, at

least for a little while.

In Tai Chi, one of the things they practised was embracing an imaginary tree, and holding the posture for a very long time. It was painful – impossible, she'd thought – and the fiery ache in her arms when she practised was like the fiery ache she now felt in her heart. It was not lust, but despair. The way to hold the tree posture was to retreat deep inside one's self and to breathe. She did it now, and slowly felt herself sinking somewhere warm and safe, taking Phil with her. He was tired, she felt him sagging against her, and she cradled his head like something precious. Finally she kissed the top of it then tipped him gently sideways and rolled him under the sheets.

"Go to sleep you idiot," she said, then went to pour the wine down the sink. If they'd drunk it and not at least tried to make love by morning there was definitely something wrong with them. Better not to drink it then, she thought. She watched him for a while, her face still burning from the tears, but feeling better, then she turned out the light and slid into the other bed.

"You've got to talk to David." he mumbled.

"Not without an apology first. He called me a whore."

"A fucking whore to be precise."

"Yes, all right, all right. He called you a dick-brain."

"You didn't ring him. You said you'd ring him."

"What? Are you my mother now? Let him stew. He's got my number – he can ring me."

CHAPTER 37

Morning brought a freshness to it, but that did not stop Phil from feeling embarrassed to be waking up in the same room as Penny. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, already dressed and smiling at him, swinging her legs like a little girl.

"Let’s go to the orchard and do push hands."

He searched his memory of the night before – all was clear. They had remained sober and nothing had happened. He was immensely relieved, and of course at the same time very disappointed.

"Okay," he said.

"And Phil? Thank you."

"I've not done anything."

"Thank you then, for not doing anything."

"You're welcome. Push hands sounds good. Let's go."

They drove to the orchard and though it was cold, they began to exercise together, keeping very close. He was uncertain, a little off centre, and she could feel it. As for Penny, she seemed perfectly calm to him and inappropriately balanced. Phil explored the limits of her, their hands and elbows circling, but she was deeply rooted and flexible, not a chink in her armour, not an ounce of loose aggression and it spooked him. This was the worst time of her life. It was the destruction of all she'd held dear, and yet she seemed calmer and surer than ever before. Or perhaps the worst thing for her had been the waiting – waiting for it to happen, waiting for years. She'd been like a cat in free-fall, scared, tumbling this way and that. But now it had happened, she'd found her feet at once, landed four-square, and was ready to bolt for cover.

That was the difference between them – right or wrong, she saw this as the definite end of something, not merely an interruption in the status quo. Perhaps it would have been better for him if he'd felt the same.

They did not speak, but their lips were close, their breath hung in wreaths about their heads, and he wondered about kissing her, as she wondered about kissing him – and he knew when she was thinking of it, as she knew when he thought of it. But they did not kiss. Instead, they smiled, and when Phil's watch bleeped, they went their separate ways without so much as a peck on the cheek because it was daylight, and the dawn of a new day, and a new certainty – at least for Penny.

Phil drove to work, and Penny watched him go. Afterwards she phoned the supermarket and said she was still sick, then did a tour of every estate agent in Middleton. By the time Phil rang her that evening to see if she was okay, she'd already signed a lease on a

terraced house in a pretty part of town. She could not afford it of course – not on her wages, but if Phil moved in, they could easily manage it between them. She told him this at some point during dinner at the Dun Bull – the lease part anyway – not the bit about him moving in. She'd have to bring that part up later... and gently.

Phil was stunned. "You've done what?"

He was surprised, understandably – also afraid she could be so impetuous, but he also admired her decisiveness, though the boundary between impetuosity and decisiveness was of course a very murky one. All right, he thought, it might have been completely the wrong thing to do, but at least she'd done *something* – unlike him. He was also curious about the house, curious that such possibilities even existed, and she could tell, and she liked it – that he was curious – because it meant things were not altogether hopeless, and when she asked him if he'd come to look at it with her he said okay.

They took Penny's car. Phil had barely had the time to register the fact they'd shared a meal together – met in public, without guilt and without worrying about the Herbert Blakedons of the world – and here she was rushing him off to view a house – but not *their* house – surely not that! Penny pulled up outside and Phil said: "My Aunt used to live in one of these, a few doors down. Decent sized rooms, nice private gardens to the rear."

"Yes, plenty of room for practising Tai Chi. I've not got the keys yet so we can't go inside, but you're right – it's a good size for the money – at least..." She'd been about to say a good size for the two of us, but managed to bite the words off before she ruined everything.

"Wow... you move fast, Pen."

"No... too slow. I should've done this ages ago."

"You don't mean that."

She ignored him, "It's ten minutes from David. Ten minutes from Sally."

What did she mean by that?

Oh, damn. Here goes then: "It puts us in the middle of them," she began, cautiously. "But we needn't think of it that way. We're still here if they need us, still here, I mean, for our children. We've been at the wrong end of everyone else's scheming for too long, Phil. I think it's time we took control, regained some honour and dignity."

"It sounds like a good plan – especially the honour and the dignity bit – but... what exactly is the plan?"

What? How could anyone read minds so perceptively and yet be so obtuse when it came to simply following what someone was actually saying: "I can't afford this place on my own," she said. "I'm asking if you've got the balls to come and live with me, share the rent."

"What?"

"I've taken out a twelve month lease. Twelve months should paint us a very different picture to the one we're standing in now, don't you think?"

"Em..."

"What do you say?"

Phil didn't know what to say. All he knew was that a door had opened and he quite liked the look of what was on the other side. But he was afraid – afraid to step through, because it was a one-way door and there was no possibility of return. But return to what? And Penny was standing on the other side of it, inviting him through when all he wanted was to gaze at the possibility – gaze at it for ever perhaps, without actually doing anything about it. Did that mean he didn't want her enough? Why did women have to be so decisive, and make you do things all the time?

"I... I... don't know."

Penny took a deep breath. It wasn't too bad, she thought – I mean he'd not come right out and said no, had he?

Phil shook his head as if to clear it. "But... I thought you wanted to fix things up between you and David."

"I never said that. You said that. But the only way I can fix things up is to do as I'm told, or rather do as his mother tells him to tell me. But I don't want to fix my marriage if it means breaking myself. I don't think I'm a selfish person, but my self is still precious to me. And maybe the reason no one seems to respect me is because I'm for ever being forced to admit that I don't actually exist. You know what I mean?"

Phil knew all right but... "Your boys, Pen..."

She pressed her lips together and lowered her eyes. No need to say anything, and Phil regretted pointing it out because it was crass. What about the boys? Well, they were going to get hurt: that's what! Just like Marty and Ellie were already hurting, already missing him, as he was missing them – though he could barely permit himself the luxury of admitting this was true.

"We didn't ask for this, Phil. We could have jumped into bed months ago, but we chose to be friends instead, because all we've ever wanted is the least hurt all round. Well, this is the same – the least hurt all round, for us, and our children."

"I'll help you with the rent."

"Oh?" Penny was thinking: this sounds hopeful!

"But I'm not moving in."

"Oh." Penny was now thinking: what's the good in that?

"We've made our point, I think," he said. "We've stated our position, stood up for ourselves. But now we should give them time to show how much they value us, how much they want us."

Give them time to spoil it more like, she thought. "I was afraid you'd say something noble and self-sacrificing like that."

"Penny, I want you. I want to move in here with you right away. I want us to be together. I want us to go to Tai Chi on Sunday mornings and walk over the moors together on Sunday afternoons and a million other trivial, cosy little things. I want to go to bed of a night and feel you beside me. I want to feel wanted by someone, but most of all by you."

"And I do want you Phil. I do..."

She wanted him? Phil could feel his head swelling with a dangerous delight. She wanted him! It was perfect. Why could he not just go with it? What was wrong with him? Why did he have to be so bloody conventional? Why try to salvage something that was plainly sour and old and spent, at the sacrifice of something new and sweet... and so wonderfully sexy?

"We have to give them a chance," he said.

Penny was dismayed. She could feel everything slipping away – all the courage and the decisiveness, and the confidence of that morning. She saw herself living in this strange, empty house all alone and she suddenly hated it. What had seemed a smiling, friendly place before now took on the glowering cool of a prison cell.

"I can't do it on my own, Phil."

Yes, she thought – that was about the measure of it: she was a coward and it's just easier to face the world with someone half decent, than face it alone. Maybe she didn't love him at all. Maybe in a couple of months she'd be hating him even more than she hated David.

"You won't be on your own, Penny. I'll be with you... just not living with you. Not yet."

"How much time should we give them?"

"I don't know."

"A week? A month? A year? How long Phil?" She could feel herself getting angry – not with Phil, but with herself for being unable to think more clearly and define more sharply just what it was that troubled her now!

He was right. Nothing had changed and there was still this odd feeling, even now, that they were being manipulated – pushed, moulded into the roles of cheap adulterers. They'd known the dangers, sensed the trap months ago and taken steps – they weren't promiscuous, or stupid. They'd been attracted to each other – of course, but so what? Just because you were married it didn't stop you from occasionally looking twice at someone else. But that's all you did! You looked.

Perhaps if things weren't going too well at home, you allowed yourself the comfort of a little fantasy, but that was all. And at the

bottom of it you knew your place was to fix things up and keep on as best you could. Except it felt now as if she was scrabbling around in the dark for pieces of her past life that she could hold onto and lash together, but there was nothing – worse than nothing, the darkness was hung with shards of glass and she dared not even move in the direction of her old life for fear of being cut to pieces.

And none of it was her fault!

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. She could never forgive David, so this was about Sally. Maybe Phil could patch things up, maybe Sally would see sense and come home. All right then, she told herself: she'd give Sally a month, but then she'd play on his weak spot, his desire, his masculine readiness to have sex at the drop of a hat, if he felt he could get away with it. A month, and then she'd take him. Was it wrong to think that way? If Sally, the stupid woman, had lost interest in him, dumped him in the mire, who could blame Penny for wiping him down and taking him home with her?

She looked at him and smiled. They'd fitted together somehow in their later lives as lovers already, lovers interrupted at some point and now they seemed perfectly capable of picking up from where they'd left off, maybe several lifetimes ago. But did she love him – I mean really *love* him? What was love if it wasn't this feeling of being warm and safe and simply more yourself when you were with someone? And she was sure he felt the same simply by the way he was so unguarded when he was with her, but she was not so stupid as to want to risk spoiling things completely by pointing this out to him.

"You don't mind if I become a Buddhist?" she asked.

"What?" Phil had been lost in her smile, wondering what on earth she was thinking. Her thoughts ran like a river in spate, surging twisting, never predictable, and there he was, paddling like mad in his flimsy canoe, always trying to keep up. But he also felt alive, felt exhilarated by the feel of her. He'd felt this coming, felt it in the steadiness of her that morning while they did Push Hands. "Perhaps I'll join you," he said.

"Oh no – that would never do. We'll be wearing matching sweaters next. What about the piercing? Can I keep that too?"

"I insist. What about my electric Virgo USB thingy?"

"You've still got it?"

"No... but if I had."

"It's up to you how you choose to play with yourself, Phil. But remember this: my pussy's always hot for you. You've only to think it and it's already opening for you. And if you were with me, I promise you'd never need that ridiculous contraption again."

He felt his stomach churn and his whole body tingled: a small orgasm – and all she'd done was look at him earnestly and say some

words!

She smiled. "Okay. We'll wait. See what happens. Will you help me move in though?"

"Of course, Penny. Anything..."

Phil did not want to wait. Of course he didn't. What could Sally possibly say that would redeem the hurt and restore his self-respect? One night with Penny would have done all that and more. One night!

"Look, I'm a channel-zapper, Pen – you said it drives you mad. Well... I'd drive you mad! Maybe I'm no good to share a house with."

"Well, no one's perfect. I pick my toenails."

"No! That's disgusting!"

"And I grind my teeth when I'm asleep."

"That's nothing... I've got this hat..."

"Hat?"

"Never mind..."

Phil understood Penny was still shutting out memories of her life with David, and they weren't all bad memories. She would never know another family moment with him or with the boys again. She was hiding from it now because it was too painful a thing to have to contemplate. The shock of things was still fresh, but soon, she would think about it, and then she would do anything to salvage what she could, because a family is more than just the two of you. And Phil guessed he would do exactly the same.

For now though Penny needed somewhere to go, a temporary roof, and this was it. He could help her with that, because that's what friends did. But he would not move in. He would not have Penny as his lover and why? Well, he had his pride, and didn't want to give Sally and her father the opportunity of saying they'd known all along there was something going on between him and Penny Barnes.

All of which meant of course that whichever way he turned, he was still piloting his life through the eyes of others. Indeed the only person whose eyes he had not seen himself through, were Penny's. Was that why he was so drawn to her – but how soon before he swapped Sally's eyes for Penny's and began the ruin of his life all over again?

Penny put her hand on his thigh and jolted him back into the reality of the moment. "Shall we say a month?"

He nodded. "A month, yes."

He looked once more at the front door of a potential future with Penny and though he felt he wanted it with all his heart, he could not see a way through any combination of circumstances whereby any of it could be made to come true. But he squeezed her hand anyway and told her he was sure things would work out all right in the end.

She didn't believe it either.

CHAPTER 38

At first it seemed a dull house, cold and cavernous, but it was clean, and Penny managed to get it in order after a week of tickling round with a damp cloth and a duster, and brightening it with flowers. There was no sense in spending a fortune on furnishings so, for the time being, it was just a mattress in the bedroom and beanbags in the lounge, plus an old TV from a second hand shop and a cheap set of pots and pans. As for the washing, she was glad of the laundrette, glad also to be dealing only with her own washing. She supposed Angela was taking care of David's underpants now and his shirts and such, washing, sorting the socks into pairs, ironing everything to a supernatural smoothness, and razor creases, as was Angela's way, and cursing Penny all the while for being a feckless slut, and enjoying it at the same time.

She did not return home for any of her belongings because it was easier to convince herself her home, her former life – David, Angela and even her children, for now, did not exist – that they had been a dream – that she had fallen asleep some time in her mid twenties and was only now waking up. This complex, if flimsy, defence was holding, for now, but she was a mother and primal instinct was stronger than water, so she knew it couldn't last for much longer.

Phil came, good as his word, and helped her to emulsion the bedroom, Hoover the carpets, and generally bottom the place. Some evenings, he'd linger late as if toying with the notion of sleeping over, but he was always away by eleven, and she rather liked his old fashioned manners. The garden had been a bit of a jungle, but he'd sorted that out for her one weekend. The thing about Phil she most admired in those first weeks of their closer acquaintanceship, was that he seemed sincere in his efforts to make sure she was okay, and that she was comfortable, while expecting nothing from her in return. She was perfectly capable of doing all this for herself of course, except at that time, without him, she wouldn't have had the will to get out of bed in the morning.

And it was good to go out in the garden together of an evening and practice their Tai Chi. They were doing well with it, and had by now developed a good feel for the moves, so that others in the class on Sundays naturally looked to them for someone to follow. They were slow with their moves, feeding off a calm energy that was at odds with some of the younger and more energetic members of the group who fancied themselves as a Bruce Lee or a Jackie Chan. It was at odds too with the turmoil of their lives, but if they could pull everything back to the same pace as when they practised the form, to

that same silken feel, then they felt capable of at least surviving.

It was also good after the class to come back to the house together, to shower (not together – but Penny told herself she lived in hope), then relax and chat over lunch. Then they would drink jasmine tea from little Chinese bowls and laugh at each other's faces screwed up, because neither of them could bear the bitter taste of the stuff, no matter how glowingly Doc Lin had bestowed its virtues.

All of this was good, she thought.

Towards the end of their first month Phil left an envelope in the hall as he was leaving. Inside she found a wad of notes to help with the rent. He'd left it without drawing attention to it, perhaps to avoid embarrassing her. She put it to one side, determined not to spend it, determined to pay him back, though she couldn't imagine how. She couldn't believe how little she was earning at the supermarket – and it even looked like Phil might be forced into premature retirement soon, so what the hell they were going to do, or how they were going to live, she didn't know. There was just this feeling they'd be all right, so long as they hoped for the best, thought good things and lived in the present moment.

If only life could be straightforward, she thought, if only we could understand what we were thinking and feeling half the time! She should have felt guilty about leaving the boys, about not caring for them, about not being on hand to pack their school dinners and wash their clothes – but she told herself she didn't feel guilty at all – that such guilt was merely sentimental and impractical. Angela would take care of all that wouldn't she? I mean, thus far Angela had taken care of pretty much everything. So any anguish Penny felt could only be the result of Ego and jealousy – or a mother's instinct – which was stupid because neither of the boys enjoyed being "mothered" any more. Indeed the pair of them cringed whenever she went near them.

But it was okay because sooner or later either David would turn up and re-stake his claim with an insincere apology, or Sally would yank Phil's chain, and the dream, whatever this dream was becoming, would be over. Maybe then she'd be a mother again. Was that fear she felt? Fear at losing this lovely uncomplicated life, or guilt that she was the worst mother on the planet and deserved to burn in David's Hell for it? Or was it just a negative emotion, and of all the names we have for negative emotions, were they not really all the same? Were they not just the result of our various attachments – attachments to things that were by their very nature, impermanent?

She'd found some more books on Buddhism down at the discount book store and picked up her reading where she'd left off at home. It was a refreshing change, being able to read stuff like that in the open without fear of causing a heart attack amongst her nearest and dearest

– a relief too she could just leave them lying around without invoking David's ire or the boy's piss-taking. Once or twice she'd found herself looking for somewhere to slide them out of view when Phil turned up, before realising it didn't matter, that with Phil, she could read what she wanted – be Buddhist today, Hindu tomorrow and a Born-again Christian by weekend. It was up to her – be as dizzy or as silly or as serious as she liked.

But for now she was definitely a Buddhist.

Just being alive meant suffering, the Buddha had said – well, she couldn't agree more with that. And the way to stop suffering was to stop being attached to things – well okay, that was understandable too, but clearly the Buddha had never been a mother! Or was she too possessive? Did she treat her kids like ornaments, like trophies of her lifestyle: I've got three bathrooms, a conservatory, and two children! She skipped over the karma pages because she reckoned she'd a lot to make up for in that department – all that spitting into Angela's custard over the years, Buddha suggested, would be coming back at her – maybe it already had, and the sooner she could lighten up and love the woman, the better it would be for her.

Love Angela?

Well... maybe I could try not hating her so much. Will that do?

Yes, she was enjoying her freedom, she told herself – or was that an illusion too? Would she not simply have been lonely without Phil popping round most evenings to distract her from her delusion? David didn't come, but she didn't fret about that, didn't try to get inside his head all the time in order to work out what the stupid man was thinking. And anyway, she and Phil were only giving it a month, and then Phil would be moving in, wouldn't he? Except he hadn't mentioned it recently and she didn't like to mention it either, because that would have been pushing him, and she wasn't sure how much Phil could be pushed – or even if she should push him at all – because there was nothing between them was there? Nothing at all. I mean they enjoyed Push Hands together, but that was as close as they got.

And it was nearly a month now, wasn't it?

CHAPTER 39

David didn't know where Penny was living. Well, she wasn't going to make it easy for him was she? Eventually though he plucked up the courage and sent a speculative text to her mobile asking if she was okay, to which she returned: "fat lot you care!" So he left it a week, then texted again. "Can we meet?" So she texted back: "Where?"

And he texted back: "The Park. Band Stand."

Damn! It had to be there didn't it? That was where he'd proposed to her, on bended knee, which only meant one thing, unless he was even more dense than she thought and he really wasn't implying anything by that particular choice of rendezvous. But whatever his reasons, she knew she wasn't going to be able to hide inside this fantasy for much longer.

A month!

She'd known all along she and Phil hadn't stood a chance.

Time? What time should she and David meet? She'd already arranged to meet Phil in the orchard, so should she meet David before or after? Before – better get it over with. Then she could either cry on Phil's shoulder about it, or they could do Push Hands one last time before they parted company for ever.

Meanwhile, Phil was washing up his breakfast stuff when Sally's car pulled onto the drive and the kids came running in. He felt his heart sing, then sink, then sing again, and when Sally walked in, he felt something of that old longing, but fortunately his memory wasn't so easily deceived and his cynicism came to his rescue, had him wondering if she'd come to make things up, or kick him out.

Her timing was bad of course. It was a Saturday and he'd arranged to meet Penny at the orchard. Did he stand Penny up, and wait to find out which way the wind was blowing with Sal? Or did he walk out on Sal, leave her scowling and the kids in tears?

She looked confident, her hair shiny and healthy, a brightness in her eyes – a brightness that he discovered was not without a hint of aggression. "Is she here?"

Phil was not to be intimidated though. Too much had happened and rather than knocking him over, he was surprised to discover that so far as Sally was concerned at least, events had settled him a little more on his feet.

"We're talking about Penny, right? No. She's never been here, Sal. Only in your imagination."

Their time apart had not weakened her. Indeed she looked stronger, and though it shamed him, he found this new look Sally rather sexy. "Is this just a flying visit?" he asked. "Or can I make you a

coffee?"

Ellie hugged him, wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed him tight. Ellie would grow up hating him if he walked out, grow up to hate Penny or indeed any other woman he looked at. Marty stood a little to one side, looking awkward, like someone uncomfortable in his own skin. He mumbled something incoherent that could have been: "Hi Dad," but Phil wasn't sure, and he felt for the lad, the bumbling awkwardness of youth – the desire to feel and the instinct to suppress simultaneously stretching and squashing him.

He wanted to tell Marty it was okay – that he'd come through it, that he'd grow into himself – but it was hardly the time or the place, was it? The moment didn't last and the kids vanished to their rooms. Then the silence of the house was shattered by the sound of a TV set vying for supremacy with a machine gun rat a tat tatting on Marty's neglected Game Station. So far as they were concerned everything was back in its place. Mum and Dad under the same roof. Childhood restored. Simple. How Phil wished he could be a child once more.

Sally took off her coat and hung it over a chair back. "I'll make the coffee," she said.

Was that it then? All back to normal? He looked out at the grass. It was getting shaggy and needed a mow, needed grooming back to a velvety nap. He'd not been that diligent with the washing either, and there were piles lying about that needed ironing and putting away. Sally would be thinking he'd let the place go, that he couldn't manage without her on top of him all the time. Sally would be thinking.... Sally would be thinking... and through her eyes he saw this worthless, workshy ne'er-do-well, this... this... fucking loser! Again.

Was that really him?

"Actually, I was just off out," he said, then he scrabbled among the clutter on the work-top for his car-keys.

"You're going? Aren't you pleased to see... the children? It's been ages,..."

"I know, so another hour or two won't make any difference will it?" He had to get out... get out and run... run where? To Penny of course!

Sally's lips tightened – an expression of: I thought as much. "You're going to her, aren't you?" she said.

Phil felt something dangerous stirring. What was that? Oh – I remember now – it's *emotion*: Hmm interesting – what a curious blend of anger, frustration and longing. It's so confusing there's no point even beginning to untangle it. "I was going to meet her, yes." Voice calm now, tone level, words measured – how strange! How daring!

Sally's eyes lit up, then narrowed. Success! The look of: *so I was right all along!*

Phil sat down. He was still going to go, but not right now. He'd

plenty of time and, anyway, this was odd: How could one be simultaneously angry, but also calm? Was he not really angry at all then? Was this unfamiliar feeling simply one of determination?

"Sal... I don't know what Trevor had to gain by making out I was playing away. I don't know how he got hold of Penny's name, but what he did was stupid and cruel. It was cruel to Penny, to me, to you, and the kids. The fact that you believed him rather than me... well, that hurt very much as well, but it wasn't your fault – that's just the way you've always been. Maybe Trevor's knocked it into you all your life that you're useless without him, and maybe by now you even believe it yourself, so that no one else can come close. As for Trevor,.. well, I forgive him, because that's just the way he's always been as well."

Sally tried not to untangle his words, tried not to register the insult, whether one had been implied or not, but drew comfort at least from his magnanimous tone. She pulled up a chair and sat down, then ventured to touch his hand but Phil drew gently away from her.

"No Sal," he said.

"What?"

That she'd tried to touch him had been enough to remind him how much of his life he'd spent wanting her, and feeling guilty on account of that want, and feeling lonely on account of it too. And she didn't want him because – let's be honest – the woman she *really* was simply didn't want him. The woman she really was was Sally, while the woman he thought she was was Caroline.

Yes. It was the last great deception. It was Caroline he'd gone on desiring and wanting and all those other things that men who remain Romantics all their lives fail to grow out of. Sometimes a woman can sense the Caroline being projected onto herself and make an accommodation – sometimes she cannot, and sometimes, after a while, she just plain refuses, because all she really wants to be is herself. And who can blame her? And if the man's lucky, and he wakes up, what you're left with is a man and woman facing each other across a table one morning and seeing each other for the first time, even though they've already known each other for decades and believed they'd known each other very well.

He wondered what it would be like doing push-hands with her. There'd most likely be nothing there, he thought – no sense of presence at all, and it would be like doing it alone, because that's the way it always was with Carolines. But now? Now that he could see Sally – really see her – could he not get to know her again? That way everything they'd built would not have been for nothing, and the kids would still have their parents under the same roof, and though they were no longer in love and could not bear to touch one another any

more, they could at least be civil and pretend everything was all right. Was that not the way these things usually went?

"I'm glad you've come home," he said.

"You are?"

"Yes. You should stay. Don't go back to your dad's house – that's throwing away everything you've got here. This is *your* house, *your* place. It's never going to be perfect, but nothing ever is in life, is it? But you've worked hard for it, and it's where the kids feel they most belong."

"All right..." Actually, she'd been thinking exactly the same thing for days now, and that's why she'd come home – well that and the peculiar feeling Emmeline Parker didn't like her very much. Sally smiled. That was good, wasn't it? Except... where did Penny Barnes fit into all of this?

And why was Phil still fumbling with his keys?

CHAPTER 40

Phil sat out on the deck of the Summer House while the orchard lay bare all round him. It was damp and cold – the trees gaunt in their nakedness. He would be moving in with Penny then. That's what he'd told Sally. He was off to meet her, he'd said, practice a little Tai Chi, then go round to her place and hopefully sort things out along those lines. No, they weren't lovers, never had been – just friends – but they'd both been thrown into a similar fix now, through no fault of their own, and it just seemed a good idea to test things out, so to speak.

So yes, he was going – and even if it didn't work out with Penny, he didn't think it would be right to try to patch things up – I mean between him and Sal. The damage was done. Maybe they'd been finished for a long time, and this was just nature's way of giving them the final shove they needed. He was sorry, and he hoped he and Sally could be friends... better for the children that way, and she could rest assured that he would always do his best for her, and the children. But no he could not live with her any more.

Had he really said all of that?

Yes, he really had, but he felt no warm and noble glow – just the cold biting around his ankles now. There was also the funny feeling he'd burnt his last bridge, and at a time of life when the only really important thing was having somewhere warm to put his feet up, and a decent bed to sleep in. It was also getting on for eleven o'clock, and Penny hadn't showed up, though they'd arranged to meet at nine. Half an hour ago he'd driven round to her place, but her car hadn't been there, so he'd come back – still no Penny – and he was beginning to feel that Caroline had tricked him one last time.

Another half an hour passed and he decided to practice on his own, if only to stop himself looking at his watch every thirty seconds. But then the gate creaked and in she came, looking cosy in a big sweater, but Phil could tell she'd been crying, and that could only mean one thing. She flashed him a brave smile, but there were words in it he couldn't decipher – more words than she could bring herself to speak.

"I'm late," she said.

"Only a couple of hours."

"You waited though."

"Well, yes... but another few days and I'd've been off."

Was that a smile? Almost, but quickly reined in. There was something wrong: reality catching up with both of them, dragging its claws, opening the wounds they'd always known it was bound to

inflict upon them sooner or later. She approached slowly, then with a graceful sway, dropped into a defensive stance, closed her eyes, waved her hands like clouds, took another step and offered him her wrists.

"Do Push Hands with me?"

David! She'd seen David! Damn him! What did that mean? What would she do? Could Phil not just ask her outright if things were still okay between them? No – too direct, and, strangely, still none of his business. Perhaps he could ask if they'd be going round to her place afterwards – then he'd know for sure how things lay, if only by her expression. Or could he not tell already? Be with me, Penny: exchange me for your children. What would he choose? Well, all right – he'd chosen... but...

He came to her slowly, his heart leaping. He was desperate to read her, but her eyes remained closed, her arms braced, ready to receive him. He gave her his wrist, then cupped her elbow with his free hand. They leaned into each other, found their centre and made a few tentative orbits.

Then Phil was flying backwards. She'd pushed him, pushed him hard, but when he looked she was still standing as before, eyes closed, arms ready.

"Again," she said.

Same thing... a few gentle orbits, then Phil found his hand trapped in an excruciating lock while Penny lowered him to his knees. "Arghh!!! Steady on."

"Shut up, you big softie. Do it again."

He understood her now, he thought, and brought himself to bear once more. His gentleness had not always pleased her. You could be gentle with something because you loved the feel of it and it was simply your nature to be gentle, or you could be gentle because you weren't sure if you wanted it and were afraid of waking it up, because it was your nature to be a coward. Penny wanted someone to push against, someone who wanted to push against her... and mean it!

"Can you mean it, Phil?"

They engaged in combat again and, when he concentrated, really concentrated, he could feel the locks coming, because her energy, though admirable, made her sometimes a little easy to outguess. He could also feel the push before she was even aware of pushing him, so he pushed back, but she was ready for him, directing his energy easily into the orbit of their arms, the orbit of their centre. So he explored her wrists again, her hands, tried to judge the puzzle of their overlapping in order to time the locks correctly without getting trapped himself but still she was ready, checking him at every turn – calm, focused, her concentration so intense now he could feel it like a warm glow radiating from her chest. So he went for her leg, twisted in

and brought her gently down across his lap.

She gasped. The grass was wet and she felt as if he'd sat her in a puddle. Then she laughed. That was better! She'd definitely felt him that time.

"You cheated!"

No, he thought. Once things became real, there were no rules: you simply had to make things up as you went along. They were not cheaters – others could say or think what they liked but as far as he was concerned, in a world full of liars he and Penny were the only true things in it. He helped her to her feet, and made ready once more, but she turned away revealing a big wet patch on her bottom.

"Just give me a minute," she laughed.

"Sure. Sorry Pen... are you okay?"

She flashed him a smile and he tried but completely failed to ignore her magnificent behind, her trousers soaked and clinging, the outline of her pants plain as day. Then she gave it a playful slap, and she liked the way he looked at her when she slapped it, poor man, his eyes lost in the wobble of her cellulite.

It was time, she thought...

"I'd better go home and change," she said, then added gently: "Come with me?"

"Sure, Pen."

And as they walked out of the orchard, she said: "It must be about a month now."

He nodded. "It's about a month, yes."

"I'm not really going home just to get changed. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Of course. I'm not completely dense."

"And how do you... feel? I mean... about that?.."

Feel?

Like a teenager.

That would be it then, he thought. But he was also thinking he didn't much care for that bare mattress on the floor of Penny's bedroom, and as soon as he could bring it up he'd suggest they got themselves a proper bed to sleep in. He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

"I feel okay," he said.

And for the first time in a long time, he realised his ears weren't ringing any more.

THE END